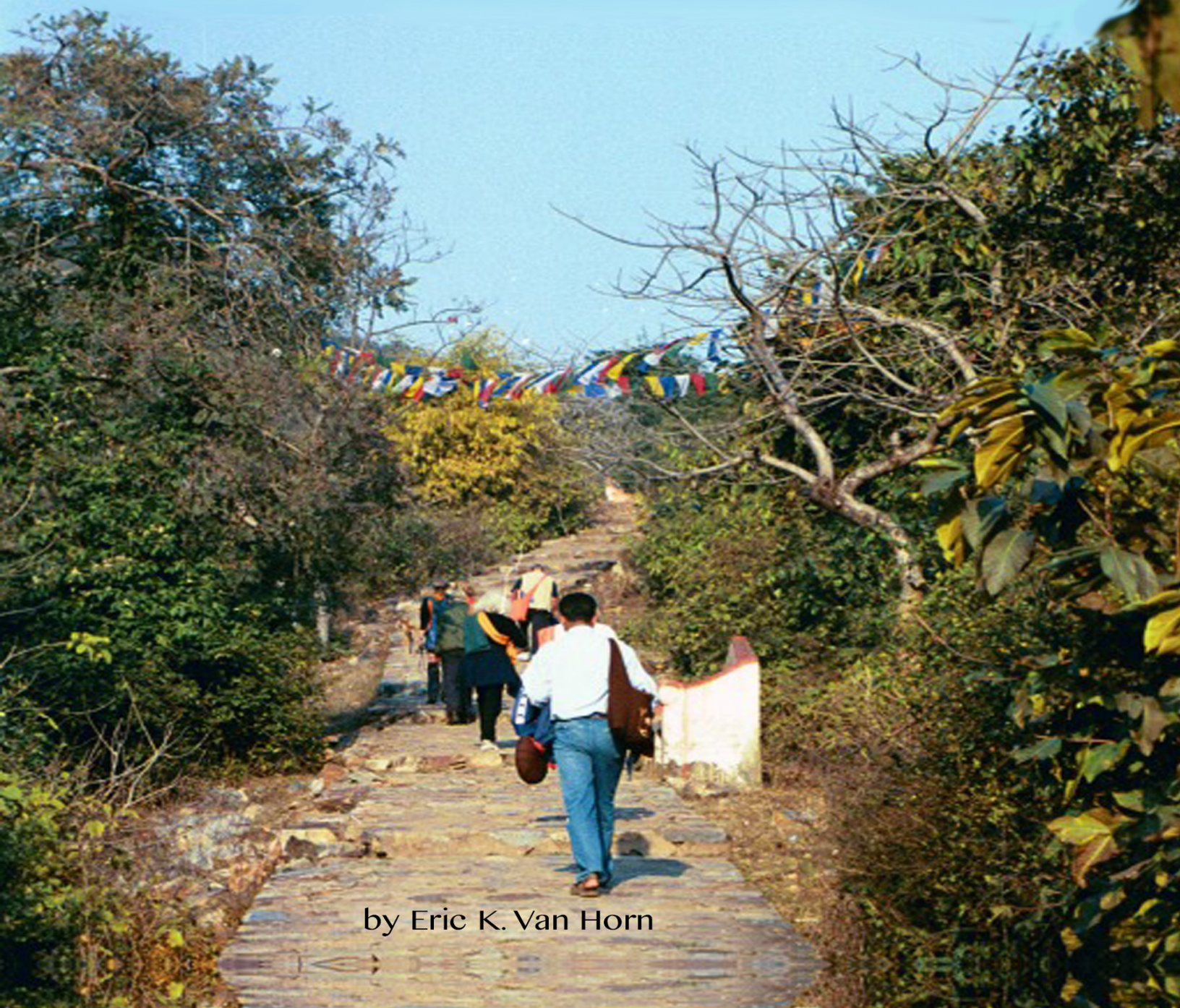


Second Edition

Travel Guide to the Buddha's Path

The Buddha's training in conduct, meditation and understanding



by Eric K. Van Horn

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*Dedicated to my parents,
who taught me that
you don't have to be rich
to have a rich life.*

Also by this author, *The Little Books on Buddhism* series:

Book 1: *The Little Book of Buddhist Meditation: Establishing a daily meditation practice*

Book 2: *The Little Book on Buddhist Virtue: The Buddha's teachings on happiness through skillful conduct*

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Preface

*Just as from a heap of flowers
Many garlands can be made,
So, you, with your mortal life,
Should do many skillful things.*
- [Dhp 53]

This guide to Buddhist practice began as a way for me to organize my thoughts about how to teach meditation. It quickly expanded to include the whole of the Buddhist path, and the document also took on a life of its own. The result is what is here.

This document is also the result of some frustration. Over the nearly 25 years that I have practiced, I have been to dozens of retreats and spent thousands of dollars and a great deal of time and effort to pursue the Buddhist path. A seminal moment occurred for me in 1995. That was the year that Bhikkhu Bodhi published the *Majjhima Nikāya: The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (co-authored with the deceased Bhikkhu Ñānamoli).

I started my Buddhist practice in a Zen group, and I was actively discouraged from reading the Buddha's original discourses. I was told that they were boring and repetitive, and I should only read the newer material. ("Newer" in Buddhist terms means somewhere between 500 and 1,000 years after the Buddha's death.)

But hearing "the Buddha said this" and "the Buddha said that" frustrated me. I wanted to read it for myself. So I bought a copy of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and spent a year working my way through it.

It was, admittedly, tough going. I didn't know much about Buddhism, and I knew even less about ancient India. And to understand what I was reading, I had to read the extensive footnotes in the back of the book. I always had two bookmarks, one for the discourses, and one for the

footnotes.

Little by little the Buddha's teachings opened themselves up to me, and they didn't sound like anything I was being taught. By then I had experience in a number of traditions. This included two lineages of Zen, one Tibetan, and "insight meditation." But no one was teaching in a way that was consistent with what I was reading.

As difficult as it was for me to understand, what I was reading was simply beautiful. It was consistent and coherent, and it all hanged together like a magnificent piece of engineering. There was breadth and depth, and while it is complicated, there is also a framework of simplicity and elegance that binds it all together.

I spent many years trying to find teachers who teach in a way that is consistent with the *Majjhima Nikāya*. In the meantime, I read the *Digha Nikāya* (*The Long Discourses of the Buddha*) and the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (*The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*). After a while, I got a sense of the language. I got a better feel for how the poetic beauty of the Pāli language translates into English (not very well). But understanding more about Pāli let me see the poetic, musical nature of the discourses. The repetition is because of how they were composed, learned, and recited. It is like the refrain in a song. When I started seeing the discourses in terms of music, they took on a whole new type of beauty. They were easier to read and easier to understand.

However, I was still having trouble finding teachers who could help me put into practice what I was reading. To be sure, some of my teachers were wonderful people. I did learn some important lessons about the Dharma. But I had three basic complaints about what I was being taught.

The first is that many things I was being taught were not true. They were simply incorrect. No one was teaching about jhāna, which is central to the Buddha's teachings. In fact, the mere mention of jhāna was likely to expose you to a verbal assault. Some years ago one of the Buddhist magazines did an issue on jhāna, and the subsequent letters to the editor

were positively vitriolic. There is a deep seeded antagonism to jhāna in much of the Buddhist community. This is despite its obvious importance in the canonical literature.

(A few years ago I did some research on jhāna in the Majjhima Nikāya. I published the results in a paper called “Jhana in the Majjhima Nikaya.” If you do a search on that exact wording, you will find it on the Internet.)

And hardly anyone was talking about rebirth, which is also central to the Buddha’s teachings. There is even a term for this. It is called “cherry picking.” This means that some people accept, a.k.a. “cherry-pick,” only the teachings that they can accept. This is based largely on their cultural conditioning.

Second, the Dharma was being over-simplified. I am not the only one who feels this way. In a letter to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the Tibetan Buddhist B. Alan Wallace said this:

Apart from the issue of definitions alone, I am concerned that Buddhist vipassana practice is not only being radically simplified for the general lay public (some would say “dumbed down”), but that it is being misrepresented in such a way that the rich teachings (in theory & practice) of the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta are being overlooked or marginalized.

- [A Correspondence between B. Alan Wallace and the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi Winter, 2006, “[The Nature of Mindfulness and Its Role in Buddhist Meditation](#)”]

I was mainly being taught to simply be with the breath and to be with whatever arises. There is certainly that aspect to practice, but it represents perhaps two percent of it. It would be like learning about the law of gravity and thinking that this represents the whole of physics.

And there was the pain. I have bad joints, and I was told to just be with

the pain. I tried heroically to do that, and I was miserable. I once sat through half a retreat with a bad tooth. When I got home I found out that I needed a root canal. Because of the instructions I got I just sat through it. I did not even take any medication. All of this was pointless.

Finally, I could not find anyone who could connect the dots for me. How do you go from your first sitting all the way to awakening? How do you awaken? How do you get at least to the first stage of awakening, “stream-entry?”

So over the years I listened to hundreds of Dharma talks and read hundreds of books and I went to all those retreats. The good news is that ultimately I was also able to cobble together the type of practice that I saw in early Buddhism and eventually to find some wonderful teachers, teachers who you will find widely quoted herein.

And that is how this volume came to be. It is my attempt to present the Buddha’s path from beginning to end, or at least as close to the end as you need someone like me to get you. This is not a complete guide. It is intended to be a framework, an outline that you can use as a map for your own journey.

I do not consider myself any kind of authority. I am just a fellow traveler who has been down some blind alleys and wants to save you the trouble. Some years ago I was at a retreat with Larry Rosenberg in which he said, “I am just a beginner.” At the time, I thought that was false modesty. But now I know what he meant. When confronted with the magnitude of what the Buddha discovered, what he did, and then his relentlessly selfless life of teaching, you can only ever feel like a beginner.

I have two great hopes for this text. The first is that it will help you be a happier, more useful person. The second is that I have accurately represented what the Buddha taught. His message is timeless. It does not need to be modernized, merged with the field of psychology, or Westernized. One of the great lessons of the Buddha’s discourses is that in 2500 years, the human mind has not changed. And the cure for our

problems of living has not changed, either.

Eric Van Horn

Rio Rancho, New Mexico

31-Oct-2016

nobleightfoldblog.com

Preface to the Second Edition

I always conceived of this book as being something organic, something that would grow and develop over time. Walt Whitman did this with his landmark book *Leaves of Grass*. *Leaves of Grass* was first published in 1855. It had 12 poems in it. By the time Walt Whitman died in 1892, there were over 400 poems in it. He constantly poked and prodded at it during his entire life.

To be sure, I don't expect changes of that magnitude to happen here. But over time I expect that this or that section will require updates, clarifications, or additions. As long as I am living and my understanding grows, and as I see places where people have trouble understanding what I have written, I expect to make changes. One of the beauties of modern day publishing, where eBooks can be updated at any time and where printed books are printed on demand, is that you can do this easily.

In the second edition, there are two main changes other than normal edits. The first is the addition of a section on Daily Living. This was a substantial oversight in the first edition. Most of the people who read this book are lay Buddhists. Bringing the Dharma into our daily lives is a considerable challenge.

The second change is the addition of Appendix C, which has the rather innocuous title "Miscellaneous Topics." There are many topics that I do not discuss in the book that have a lot of influence in the Buddhist world. These include emptiness, Buddha nature, non-duality, and so on. I do not discuss these topics in the rest of the book either because they are not prominent in the Buddha's own teaching or because they are not there at all.

There is a bit of a risk in this section. I know that many Buddhists will take offense at my understanding. I do not intend to offend anyone, and if it is important to you to believe something other than what I say, that is

fine. All of us have understandings that grow over time if we let them.

The reason that I take on these controversial topics is because of how they confused me when I first came to meditation. When I started I knew nothing. I was a complete blank page. In a way that is good, but it depends on what you put on that page. Garbage in-garbage out, as the saying goes. And I had a lot of trouble sorting through things I was being told, mainly because a lot of them didn't make sense.

Now it is over a quarter of a century later. I have spent a lot of time immersing myself in the Pāli Canon, and I think I have a reasonable understanding of how Buddhism evolved over the years. So what I wrote in Appendix C is especially targeted at people who are as confused by these topics as I was. They can be a serious hindrance to your practice. They certainly were to mine.

Some people may object to a method of practice that is rooted in the Pāli Canon. To that I can only say this. I practiced in all of the major schools of Buddhism. And I kept going back further and further to the original teachings of the Buddha. Eventually, I came to have three understandings about Buddhism:

1. That the Pāli Canon gives a good representation of what the Buddha taught. This is not to say that every word has been transmitted perfectly over 2400 years, but that if you read the Pāli Canon, it is clear what the Buddha taught.
2. That when the Buddha awakened, he saw into the ultimate, transcendent nature of reality. This is important because some people somewhat trivialize his awakening. Seeing into the ultimate, transcendent nature of reality is seeing truth that is the same no matter what the cultural context. It even transcends the planet. If it is ultimately true, it has to be true on Alpha Centauri.
3. That a Buddha or an Arahant always speaks the truth. This is important because some people claim that the Buddha's teachings, like those on rebirth, are "skillful means." The argument is that because people at the Buddha's time believed in

things like rebirth, he was speaking to their cultural understanding.

However, I want to be careful about making this into an ideological treatise. The Buddha's path is a system of training. Use what works for you. If an idea gets in the way of that, even if it is an idea of the Buddha's, put it onto a corner shelf for now.

The goal is always the same, and that is to be happier and more useful. Be open but also be critical. This is about developing your mind in all of its aspects.

Eric Van Horn
Rio Rancho, New Mexico
4-Dec-2016

Terminology and Conventions

Because the Buddhist Canon that I use is in the Pāli language, I usually use Pāli terms. However, some Sanskrit Buddhist terms have become common in the English language and it seems rather affected not to use them. The two most obvious examples are the words “nirvāṇa,” which is “nibbāna” in Pāli, and “Dharma,” which is “Dhamma” in Pāli. For the most part, I use the commonly known terms. But if it seems awkward to have the Pāli terms in quotes or in certain words (like *Dhammacakkappavattana*) and use the Sanskrit terms in the main text, I use the Pāli words.

I try to avoid technical terms in the beginning of the guide until you can get used to them. However, if there are terms with which you are unfamiliar, they should be in the glossary in Appendix A.

As per APA style guidelines, book names are italicized (i.e., *Foundations of Buddhism*) and magazine articles and Internet resources are capitalized and quoted (i.e., “The Benefits of Walking Meditation”).

Internet Conventions

There are many references to resources that are on the Internet. This is always a problem because hyperlinks are notoriously unreliable. Thus, I have adopted a convention of putting Internet search keywords in the text as well as a hyperlink to the resource. For example, a reference to Thich Nhat Hahn’s gāthās (“poems”) is “[thich nhat hanh gathas here and now](#).” If links are supported and the link is not broken, clicking on the search keywords will open that resource. If you are reading this in a context where Internet links are not supported or the link is broken, you can still find the resource by doing a search using the keywords. If you use the search keywords, the resource should be the first one in the search result list.

The other case is when an article is cited. It will look like this:

- [Sayadaw U Silananda, "[The Benefits of Walking Meditation](#)"]

Again, if your reader does not support hyperlinks or the link is broken, searching on the author's name and the article name should get you to the article. Some names and words use diacritical marks and you may have to remove them to find the correct resource. For example, for the name "Thānissaro" use the non-diacritical form "Thanissaro."

Abbreviations Used for Pāli Text References

AN: *Anguttara Nikāya, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*

Bv: *Buddhavaṃsa, Chronicle of Buddhas*

BvA: *Buddhavaṃsatthakathā, commentary to the Buddhavaṃsa*

Cv: *Cullavagga, the “smaller book,” the second volume in the Khandhaka, which is the second book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)*

Dhp: *Dhammapada, The Path of Dhamma, a collection of 423 verses*

DhpA: *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā, commentary to the Dhammapada*

DN: *Dīgha Nikāya, The Long Discourses of the Buddha*

Iti: *Itivuttaka, This Was Said (by the Buddha), a.k.a., Sayings of the Buddha*

Ja: *Jātaka Tales, previous life stories of the Buddha*

JaA: *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā, commentary on the Jātaka Tales*

Khḥp: *Khuddakapāṭha, Short Passages*

MA: *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā, commentary on the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (by Buddhaghosa)*

MN: *Majjhima Nikāya, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*

Mv: *Mahāvagga, the first volume in the Khandhaka, which is the second book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)*

Pm: *Pātimokkha, The Code of Monastic Discipline*, the first book of the monastic code (the Vinaya)

SN: *Samyutta Nikāya, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*

S Nip: *Sutta Nipāta, The Sutta Collection*, literally, “suttas falling down,” a sutta collection in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* consisting mostly of verse

Sv: *Sutta-vibhaṅga: Classification of the Suttas*, the “origin stories” for the Pātimokkha rules

Thag: *Theragāthā: Verses of the Elder Monks*

ThagA: *Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, Commentary to the *Theragāthā*

Thig: *Therīgāthā: Verses of the Elder Nuns*

ThigA: *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, Commentary to the *Therīgāthā*

Ud: *Udana, Exclamations*, the third book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*

Vin: *Vinaya Pitaka, Basket of Discipline*, the monastic rules for monks and nuns.

I. Learning How to Meditate

Introduction

“And what is the noble search? Here someone being himself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, seeks the unborn supreme security from bondage, nibbāna; being himself subject to aging, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, he seeks the unaging supreme security from bondage, nibbāna; being himself subject to sickness, having understood the danger in what is subject to sickness, he seeks the unailing supreme security from bondage, nibbāna; being himself subject to death, having understood the danger in what is subject to death, he seeks the deathless supreme security from bondage, nibbāna; being himself subject to sorrow, having understood the danger in what is subject to sorrow, he seeks the sorrowless supreme security from bondage, nibbāna; being himself subject to defilement, having understood the danger in what is subject to defilement, he seeks the undefiled supreme security from bondage, nibbāna. This is the noble search.” - [MN 26.12]

This is the first in a series of lessons that will teach you how to meditate. This type of meditation is based on the Buddha’s original teachings. The Buddha himself either gave these instructions, or they are in the spirit of what he taught. I will try and point out which ones are which as we proceed. The source for what the Buddha taught is the Pāli Canon. Pāli is

a language of ancient India. The Pāli Canon is at present the best and most complete source we have for the Buddha's original teachings.

You do not have to be a Buddhist to benefit from the Buddha's teachings. Many of his teachings are non-sectarian and can benefit anyone. So if you find some aspect of the Buddha's teaching to be a problem, put it aside for now. The best thing that you can do with a teaching that you find difficult to accept or do not understand is to file it away for future reference.

The Buddha taught a path that is called "sīla-samādhi-pañña." "Sīla" is the Pāli word for morality, virtue, or right conduct. "Samādhi" is the Pāli word for concentration or mental absorption. And "pañña" is the Pāli word for wisdom or discernment.

Normally, the first teaching in Buddhism is sīla. However, I think that in the West there are some problems with teaching morality first, so I will begin with the practice of samādhi. The purpose of samādhi is to establish a sense of well-being. It is your home base. You go there whenever you are struggling. In its purest form the Buddha called this the "pleasure born of seclusion." Once we have discussed how to establish well-being, we will discuss the Buddha's teachings on virtue.

The Purpose of Buddhist Meditation

The Buddha famously said, "...both formerly and now, what I teach is suffering and the end of suffering" [MN 22.38, SN 22.86]. This is very useful to remember. Sometimes it seems that one part of the path is in conflict with another part of the path. In these cases, remember that the basic premise of what the Buddha taught is to end suffering.

One of the beauties of the Buddha's path is that it is not an all or nothing proposition. You do not have to wait until you get to the end of the path to experience some freedom from suffering. The Buddha taught "the gradual path" (Pāli: anupubbasikkhā). As you progress, you get happier, more contented, more at ease, and you create fewer problems for

yourself and others. It is very rewarding when you see your path open in this way. You will have an “Ah-ha!” moment, a situation where something happens, where you act in a more skillful way, and you will think to yourself, “Well, *that* was different!”

The Buddha always tried to teach in a way that would help people to be happier and more skillful and to suffer less. He did this no matter what their situation in life. To that end, he gave advice to husbands and wives, children, rulers of countries, merchants, and people from all walks of life to act more skillfully. He did not limit his teaching just to monks and nuns and lay women and lay men who dedicated their lives to a full awakening.

So that is the first purpose of the practice: to be happier, to be more skillful and to cause less suffering.

However, there is also a super-mundane aspect to the path, and that is final liberation. This aspect of the path can be especially difficult for Westerners to accept, but it is a fundamental part of the Buddha’s teachings. He taught that we are reborn over and over and over, endlessly, and have done so through infinite time. If we live a good, moral life, we improve the chances of having a good rebirth in the human realm or one of the heavenly realms. If we lead a less than moral life, the chances go up that we will be reborn in one of the lower realms as a (hungry) ghost, an animal, or in one of the hell realms.

This cycle continues until one becomes fully awakened, and a full awakening is the ultimate fruit of the Buddha’s path.

How to Practice

The Pāli word for meditation is “bhāvanā.” Bhāvanā literally means “to develop” or “to cultivate.” When you plant a garden, you do not make the seeds grow. You create the optimal conditions for the seeds to grow. The seeds will germinate or not based on whether the seed is strong and the conditions are proper. If it does germinate, that will happen in its

own good time. You cannot make a tomato grow overnight.

So you prepare the soil, you plant the seed, you keep it clear of weeds, you water it and feed it, and if everything goes well, after a fashion you will have some tomatoes.

This is very unlike how we are wired in the West. We are results oriented. We want to achieve. We want to be successful. And then we start to meditate, and we get simple instructions, and we can't do them, at least in the beginning. And we get frustrated. We may even quit. All we have done is to find a new way to make ourselves suffer.

The two qualities that will serve you best in meditation are patience and persistence. Persistence is the ability to continue relentlessly, whether or not things appear to be going well. Patience is the ability to have compassion for yourself, and to trust the process and to let it unfold. Accomplished meditators tend to have a lightness about how they deal with problems. They also tend to have a pretty good sense of humor.

There will be parts of your meditation that you find challenging and difficult. This is fine, and one of the things that you learn to do as a meditator is to take those times and not turn them into a problem. So if you have an unpleasant sitting, that is all it is, an unpleasant sitting. You don't have to turn that into a problem.

In fact, one of the important lessons in meditation is how we take non-problems and turn them into problems, take small problems and turn them into big problems, and take bigger problems and turn them into conflagrations. The unawakened mind is a drama queen (or king) at heart.

Meditation is also like exercise. If you exercise skillfully, gradually the weak muscles get stronger. But you must do it, and you must do it skillfully. No one decides to run a marathon one day and runs 26 miles the next day. You start by running however long you can, and over time the distance you can run gets longer.

So it is with meditation. We start with a mind that is likely to be pretty wild. And by working with that mind every day as best we can, over time that mind gets stronger, more skillful, and happier.

So the preferred way to practice is to make sure you do it every day and let go of results as best you can. The results will happen if you can do those two things, and it is very gratifying and often a little surprising when the practice manifests.

Summary

1. The purpose of meditation is to reduce and ultimately eliminate suffering for yourself. This has the equal effect of being of benefit to those around you.
2. Meditation requires patience and persistence.
3. Try not to turn your meditation into another problem for yourself.
4. Meditation is like exercise. You must do it regularly to get results. Over time the mind will get stronger, more peaceful, and more discerning.

Establishing a Physical Posture

“Here a [meditator], gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him...” - [MN 118.17]

It is amazing to me how many long-term meditators still find it difficult to sit comfortably for any length of time. I once went to a retreat at the Bhavana Society where after a few days it was such a problem that one of the senior lay people there offered a workshop on how to sit. And everyone at that retreat had a great deal of experience.

Some meditation teachers will tell you to just somehow grit your teeth and live with whatever pain arises. There will come a time when dealing with physical discomfort will be part of the practice. However, in the beginning it is very important to establish a comfortable sitting posture. In the Tibetan tradition they call this “finding a seat.”

There is really only one aim for your physical posture. That aim is to find a sitting position where you can put the body and leave it there relatively comfortably for the duration of the sitting. If your sitting posture accomplishes that goal, you have found your seat.

Do not be surprised if it takes some time, effort, and experimentation to find your seat. You may also find that as you age you need to accommodate changes in your body. As with all things in your meditation practice, it requires both patience and persistence to find a rock solid sitting posture.

Establishing a comfortable, stable, sitting posture is the first skill that you must master to meditate.

I am going to relegate the instructions on posture to three positions. These do not include any of the lotus positions (full, half, and quarter).

They are wonderful postures if you can do them. However, my guess is that if you can do them, you do not need an explanation. This section might be called “postures for the rest of us.”

The Burmese Position

The first posture is sometimes called “the Burmese position.” It is a very stable three-point posture that people throughout Asia use, and it is accessible for most people. I have very bad joints and curvature of the spine, and I find this is my most stable position and my preferred posture.



Figure: The Burmese sitting posture

This illustration shows someone on a zafu, which is the traditional

meditation cushion, and a zabuton, which is the pad underneath. However, you do not need special cushions for meditation. When I first started I was broke, and I used pillows, blankets, and towels. The Buddha sat on piles of buffalo grass.

As you can see, the knees and feet are on the floor. In all of the postures the hips are tilted forward and the back is straight. The head should balance on top of the spine, otherwise the shoulders will strain.

Whenever you sit down to meditate, no matter what position you are using, the same principles apply: head, hips, and hands. The head is balanced on top of the spine. You may find it helpful to sway back and forth and side-to-side to find the right balance point. The head is quite heavy. The hips must tilt forward slightly and be open. The hands must not pull the shoulders forward.

The biggest problem with this posture is limited flexibility in the hips. You may feel the strain in the feet or the knees, but the problem is usually in the hips. You may also find that after a longer sitting, the lower back and/or the upper back (shoulders) are strained. It is helpful to know a few stretches to relieve discomfort in these areas. I have a stretching routine that I got from Bob Anderson's book *Stretching*.

In order to keep a good, vertical position and the head balanced, you may find that you have to lean back a bit further than at first feels comfortable. Some people even feel as if they are going to fall over backward. You will have to experiment, but do not be afraid to lean back farther than you think is reasonable.

Another thing that can help in the beginning is when you first sit down, stretch your entire upper body forward and then lean back into a vertical position. Then check that the head balances on top of the spine.

The other issue is the hands. The hands as shown in the photograph are in the preferred position. Some people put their hands on their legs or knees, but this tends to pull the shoulders forward. This creates a lot of strain in the upper back. In order to get your hands at the proper height,

you may need to fold your clothing in a way that supports the hands. I have shorter than normal arms so I have to make this adjustment. You can also put a small cushion on your lap to support the hands.

Finally, the dominant hand goes on the bottom. If you are left-handed, put the left hand on the bottom holding the right hand. If you are right-handed, put the right hand on the bottom holding the left hand.

So the abbreviated summary of bodily posture is this: hips tilted forward, back straight, head balanced on top of the spine, and the hands comfortably on the lap, making sure that they are not pulling the shoulders forward.

The Seiza Position

“Seiza” is the Japanese word for “sitting.” In Japan people sit in this position. Unlike Westerners, they do not use cushions or benches. They simply sit on their folded legs. However, as we are not used to it, we usually use a cushion under the buttocks or use a seiza bench:

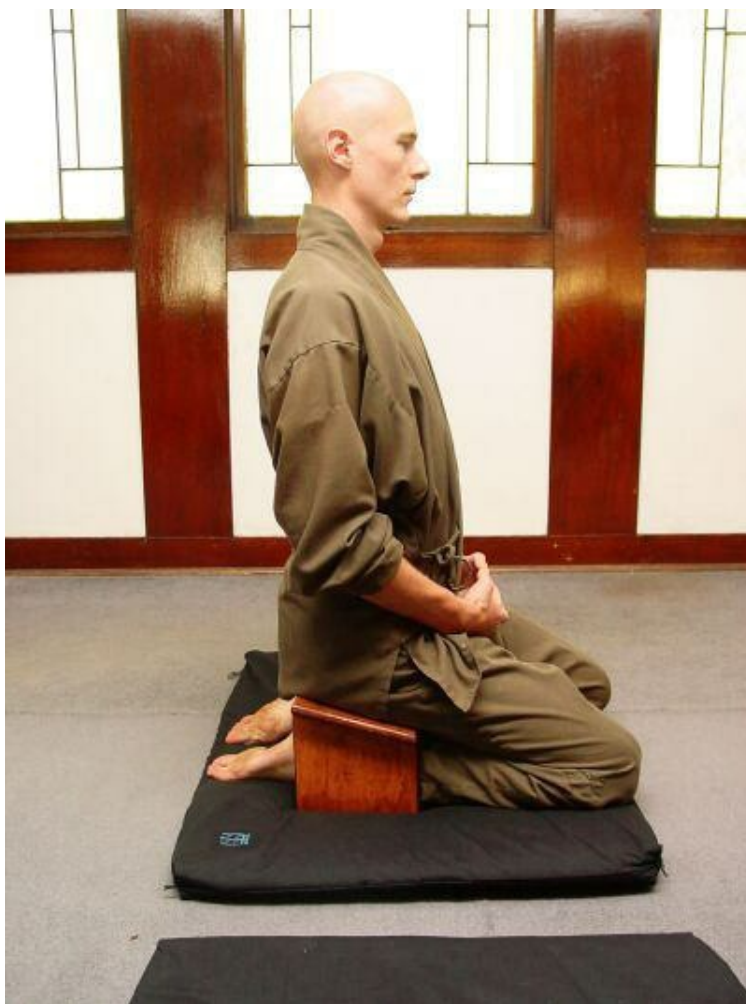


Figure: The Seiza Position

The instructions for the head, hips, and hands are the same as for the Burmese position.

We are all different heights and have different body proportions. Because of this you have to find the proper spot on the bench on which to sit comfortably. I am short and have found that I need to consciously sit on the front of the bench, otherwise my back and hips are not in the correct position. Someone who is tall will probably need to sit more toward the back of the bench.

There are many different types of seiza benches, but my experience is that the traditional one works the best. However, do not be afraid to experiment. What works best for me may not work best for you. I also

sometimes use a cushion instead of a bench in the seiza position. To do this, just put the cushion between your knees. If the cushion is a zafu, you can turn it on its side. If you are sitting in a Burmese position, it is easy to switch to a seiza position using the cushion. When you are sitting for a long time, such as when you are on retreat, switching back and forth between the Burmese position and the seiza position can make sitting a little more comfortable.

Sitting in a Chair

Most people think that this will be the easiest position, but that is not necessarily true. This is how we ordinarily sit, but we hardly ever sit for very long in a stable posture. You may need to pay a little more attention to how you sit than you normally do.

You want to start by checking the leg position. Chairs are all the same height but people are not. Taller people will find their knees above the hips, and shorter people will find the front of the chair cutting into their upper legs. The idea is to get the upper leg sloping slightly downwards at about a 10-degree angle from the horizontal. Taller people may need to put cushions under the buttocks; shorter people will need to put cushions or towels or blankets under their feet.

Sit on the forward part of the chair. Do not lean against the back of the chair. Put the head, hips, and hands in the same position as described for the Burmese position. I find the hardest part is keeping the hips cocked forward and the back straight. A cushion may help to keep the hips leaning forward properly.

One chair that works well for me is the “tilt seat eco chair” made by Carolina Designs. I tried many of the so-called ergonomic chairs without any success, but this one works well for me.



Figure: The Tilt Seat

A few years ago I had a knee injury and could not sit on the floor, so I bought one of these. I also bought a cushion for it, which is a separate item.

I realize that not everyone will want to buy a special chair. Be assured that by using towels and pillows and whatever you have available you can make a chair work. Stick to the principles of head, hips, and hands and maintaining the proper angle at the knees.

How Long to Meditate

It takes a while to establish a stable and comfortable position. Just like running a marathon, do not over-do it in the beginning. Find a length of time that works for you. I started with five minutes. That seemed like an eternity. Work your way up slowly. You may add a minute a day, or five minutes a week. Do whatever makes you feel comfortable and then sit just a while longer.

The standard sitting times are 45 minutes or an hour. However, I find that as little as 10 minutes is enough to establish a calmer, more settled state of mind. 20 minutes is better. You will have to find some time that fits into your daily schedule. Try to make this somewhere between 20 minutes and an hour. However, as I said, in the beginning start with what you can do, perhaps just five minutes, and work your way up.

We will also be doing a practice shortly called “sweeping” that is helpful in establishing a comfortable posture.

You can use any convenient timer. It is good to use a timer and not a watch. If you are using a watch, you have to keep looking at it, and that is a distraction. For a long time I just used a kitchen timer. Then I switched to a “GymBoss timer.” Now I use an iPad application. But anything that keeps you from having to look at a watch is fine.

There is one last thing. Despite what I said about being comfortable, one of the things we are trying to learn is how to work with discomfort. We want to make it workable. No matter how much we may want life to be a certain way, it has a habit of being just the way it is. This includes mental and physical discomfort. In meditation we are not trying to make those go away. They won't anyway so there is no point to it. We are trying to not make the discomfort into a problem. Thus, if when you are sitting you feel a little discomfort, do not quickly respond by shuffling or changing position. Sit with it a little and see what happens. See if it goes away. See if it changes. Get to know it. That is “making it workable.”

I have a “three strikes and you are out” rule. The first time I feel something unpleasant, I just sit with it and see what happens. It will usually go away. Then I do this a second time. By the third time I feel it, I will usually change position, slowly and mindfully.

There will come a time when the discomfort fades into the background. I heard a story once about a young man who entered a Zen monastery in Japan. He really had trouble with sitting, and in Zen monasteries they are very strict about not moving during a sitting. He had a lot of pain. Finally he gave up and decided to quit the monastery. When he was having his exit interview with the abbot he asked, “If I were to stay here another six months, would the pain go away?” “No,” replied the abbot, “But you wouldn’t care anymore.”

The way I am going to teach meditation will, I hope, not cause you this kind of pain. The moral of the story is that at some point your concentration will be such that any discomfort you feel will not matter anymore. This is a great lesson in the power of the mind and the practice.

Summary

There is a lengthy discussion here of how to do something that we do every day. But this is an example of how little we know about our bodies. You have already learned a great deal that most people do not know. Getting to know the body is one of the most important aspects of meditation practice. It is so important that the “Kāyagatāsati Sutta: Mindfulness of the Body” [MN 119] describes an entire path to final liberation using only the body as the object of meditation.

1. The goal of your sitting posture is to find a position where you can put the body and leave it there relatively comfortably for the duration of the sitting.
2. Regardless of the position, the same principles apply: head, hips, and hands. The head balances on top of the spine. The hips tilt forward and are open. The hands must not pull the shoulders forward.

3. If you are sitting on a chair make sure that the knees are at the proper angle.
4. Use a timer and not a watch so you can meditate without being distracted.

Establishing a Mental Posture

At Sāvattthī. Standing to one side, that devatā recited this verse in the presence of the Blessed One:

*“Those who dwell deep in the forest,
Peaceful, leading the holy life,
Eating but a single meal a day,
Why are their faces
so bright and serene?”*

*[The Blessed One:]
“They do not sorrow over the past,
don’t long for the future.
They survive on the present,
That’s why their faces
are bright and serene.*

*“From longing for the future,
From sorrowing over the past,
fools wither away
Like a green reed cut down.”
- [SN 1.10]*

Once you establish a physical posture, the next step is to establish a mental posture. This means leaving behind all of your distracted thoughts, your preoccupations, thinking about the past, worrying about the future, and bringing your mind completely into the present moment.

The process that I describe here is one that I learned some years ago at a meditation retreat. I still use it, and there is a certain comfort and a feeling of coming home that you can get by having a set routine every time that you sit down to meditate. This process has five steps:

1. Gratitude
2. Remembering why we practice
3. Loving-kindness for yourself
4. The five subjects for frequent recollection
5. Turning your attention to the breath

Gratitude

I am grateful for what I am and have. My thanksgiving is perpetual.

- [Henry David Thoreau, *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*]

Start by sitting on the cushion or chair, checking your head, hips, and hands, getting the body into a position where you can leave it for the duration of the sitting, and then take several deep breaths. As you inhale, feel the breath energy spread to the whole body. As you exhale, release any tension you have in the body and in the mind. Bring your body and mind to as calm a state as you can.

Then we want to establish a feeling of gratitude.

The Buddha said this about gratitude:

"...one possessing four qualities is deposited in heaven as if brought there. What four? Bodily good conduct, verbal good conduct, mental good conduct, and gratitude or thankfulness. One possessing these four qualities is deposited in heaven as if brought there." - [AN 4.213]

You can establish gratitude in any way that works for you. You may feel gratitude for a friend, parent, child, situation, the gift of having a human life. It can be anything. You can feel gratitude simply for the opportunity to learn meditation. This is a "worldly way" to establish a mind of gratitude.

Traditionally in Buddhism you establish gratitude for the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. The Buddha is the person without whom we would not have these teachings. He gave up a life of wealth, ease, and comfort, and at great sacrifice he discovered the path to awakening.

The word “Dharma” has several meanings, but in this case “the Dharma” means the teachings of the Buddha, the understanding of how life works. The Buddha left an enormous number of discourses numbering many thousands of pages that describe our state in life and how to improve it. It is a gift of immeasurable value.

The word “Saṅgha” literally means “community.” In modern times it has come to mean anyone in the Buddhist community. However, traditionally there were two types of Saṅgha. One is the “monastic Saṅgha,” the community of monks and nuns. These are the people who give up traditional pleasures to devote themselves full-time to this practice. They are also the ones who preserve the tradition and embody it.

The second type of Saṅgha is the “noble Saṅgha.” These are the people who have attained an awakening, people who are awakened. Because there are lay people who are awakened, the noble Saṅgha is not a subset of the monastic Saṅgha. The noble Saṅgha is especially inspirational to those who seek to awaken. They show it can be done; they are a model for our own aspirations.

Feeling gratitude for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha is a transcendent way to establish gratitude. That is not to make the worldly way somehow inferior. Whatever works for you is fine. Sit with this feeling for a few moments, whatever feels comfortable for you.

Remember Why We Are Practicing

The next step is to remember why we are practicing. It is so easy to sit down and start to watch the breath and not remember why we are

bothering to do this in the first place.

“...there are these four kinds of persons found existing in the world. What four? One who is practicing neither for his own welfare nor for the welfare of others; one who is practicing for the welfare of others but not for his own welfare; one who is practicing for his own welfare but not for the welfare of others; and one who is practicing both for his own welfare and for the welfare of others.

“...The person practicing both for his own welfare and for the welfare of others is the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four persons.” - [AN 4.95]

We are not just sitting here watching the breath to kill time. This is important business. At stake is our own happiness and peace of mind. And as we become more skillful, we are of great benefit to those around us. These two things are inextricably linked. We practice to become happy and useful. This step is to bring those two purposes into the forefront.

Loving-kindness

The next step is to establish a mind of loving-kindness and good will for ourselves. The Pāli word is “mettā.” It literally means “love” but the word “love” is so emotionally charged and abused that “mettā” is usually translated as “loving-kindness.”

It is important to have respect for yourself, especially in this practice. The mere fact that you are reading this makes you an unusual person, someone with a good heart and wise intentions. You should have respect for that. You should love yourself as much or more than anyone else in your life. You must be your own best friend.

There is this story from the Pāli Canon. King Pasenadi was the King of Kosala, one of the two superpowers in ancient India. Queen Mallikā had been a poor girl who King Pasenadi made his queen:

I have heard that on one occasion the [Buddha] was staying near Sāvattthī at Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. And on that occasion King Pasenadi had gone with Queen Mallikā to the upper palace. Then he said to her, "Mallikā, is there anyone dearer to you than yourself?"

"No, great king. There is no one dearer to me than myself. And what about you, great king? Is there anyone dearer to you than yourself?"

"No, Mallikā. There is no one dearer to me than myself."

Then the king, descending from the palace, went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "Just now, when I had gone with Queen Mallikā to the upper palace, I said to her, 'Mallikā, is there anyone dearer to you than yourself?'

"When this was said, she said to me, 'No, great king. There is no one dearer to me than myself. And what about you, great king? Is there anyone dearer to you than yourself?'

"When this was said, I said to her, 'No, Mallikā. There is no one dearer to me than myself.'"

Then, on realizing the significance of that, the [Buddha] on that occasion exclaimed:

*“Searching all directions
with your awareness,
you find no one dearer
than yourself.
In the same way, others
are thickly dear to themselves.
So you shouldn’t hurt others
if you love yourself.” - [Ud 5.1]*

This, of course, is not narcissistic love. It is a genuine wish for your own happiness and well-being.

One way to establish mettā for yourself is to think of someone who you love dearly, someone for whom you wish nothing but happiness. Babies and children are good objects of mettā. Our agendas for them are purer and more altruistic. Once you have established that feeling for them, you can turn that feeling onto yourself. Another technique that is helpful is to think of yourself as a baby and think how much you would love and care for that baby.

Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection

The next step is remembering the five subjects for frequent recollection. There is a discourse by this name chanted daily in monasteries around the world.

The five subjects are:

1. We are all subject to sickness.
2. We are all subject to aging.
3. We are all subject to death.
4. Everything that we know and love we will leave behind.
5. The one thing that we take with us is our karma, the fruits of our actions, both good and bad.

The intention here is to conjure up a sense of urgency and to keep us

focused on the prize. What matters most in our lives is the basic goodness that we develop. We do this on and off of the cushion, and they reinforce each other.

Turn Your Attention to the Breath

Once you have reviewed the five subjects, it is time to turn your attention to the breath. In the next chapter, we will discuss the topic of breath meditation. For now, it is enough to understand that in the beginning we just want to know the breath.

There is a very poetic passage from the Pāli Canon about this step in the meditation process. You may want to memorize it and use it as the entry point to watching the breath:

“And how... does a [meditator] abide contemplating the body as a body? Here a [meditator], having gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; folds her legs crosswise, sets her body erect, and establishes mindfulness in front of her, ever mindful she breathes in, mindful she breathes out.” - [MN 10.4]

Summary

In order to establish a mental posture, perform the following steps:

1. Take several deep, cleansing breaths.
2. Establish gratitude in the mind.
3. Remember why you are practicing.
4. Establish loving-kindness for yourself.
5. Remember the five subjects for frequent recollection.
6. Turn your attention to the breath.

Breath Meditation

“Bhikkhus, when mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it fulfills the four foundations of mindfulness. When the four foundations of mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they fulfill the seven enlightenment factors. When the seven enlightenment factors are developed and cultivated, they fulfill true knowledge and deliverance.” - [MN 118.15]

Once you have established both a physical posture and a mental posture, the next step is to turn your attention to the breath.

There are many objects of meditation. The commentarial work, the *Visuddhimagga*, lists 40 such objects. However, from the time of the Buddha, the breath has been the most used and most common object of meditation. The Buddha’s most complete instructions on meditation are in the “*Ānāpānasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing*” [MN 118].

The Buddha never gave specific instructions on where in the body to do this. In future lessons we will discuss various places to follow the breath. But for now, start by following it at the nostrils. There you can feel the air moving in and out of the body.

Some years ago I went to a retreat with the Viet Nameese monk Thich Nhat Hanh where he said that in all the decades in which he had done breath meditation, the breath had always been fascinating and it had never become boring. At the time, frankly, I could not imagine that. But as the years have gone by, I have seen that what the breath reveals is almost infinite.

The first thing to do in following the breath at the nostrils is to find the

places where the breath is felt most strongly. This may be at the tips of the nostrils, farther up in the nose, just below the nose, on the upper lip, etc. You may feel it at one place on the in-breath and another on the out-breath. At different sittings you may feel it at different spots. So start every sitting by finding the precise location where you feel the breath most strongly.

As you do this, you may notice that a single breath can be broken into parts. Before the next in-breath there is often a pause, a still moment when the breath is not moving in or out. Then you begin the in-breath. The breath at this point may feel very faint. Next, you move into the middle part of the breath, and the end of the in-breath follows that.

Some people feel a slight pause between the in-breath and the out-breath. Then the out-breath, likewise, has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

In order to see these parts you must follow the breath all the way in and all the way out. This is the fundamental way to do breath meditation.

Expanding the Awareness

As the mind and body get more settled, you may find your awareness naturally expanding to fill the whole body. This is the desired result. If you do not experience this at this point that is fine. Do not worry about. But at some point you will probably feel this happening. It is an expanded sense of awareness.

This expanded sense of awareness is very important in breath meditation, and it is what the Buddha taught. In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, the first three steps are given as follows:

“Breathing in long, [the meditator] discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’ He trains himself,

'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.'" - [MN 118.18]

What I am calling "the breath" is really "breath energy." As you breathe in and out, you may feel the breath energy anywhere in the body. You may want to play with this a little to confirm what I am saying. Put your attention somewhere else for a few breaths. It could be anywhere: the hands, the center of the chest, the throat, the soles of the feet. You can sense breathing in and breathing out anywhere in the body.

This introduces a couple of very important topics. The first is playing with the breath. Meditation is about learning. Larry Rosenberg says that in Buddhist meditation, we learn our way out of suffering. Here we are beginning to learn about our bodies and the breath. You may have heard the instruction to simply be with the breath. That is one way to meditate, and it can be quite wonderful. But personally I think that type of practice is very difficult to do in the beginning. Most of the Buddha's instructions are, in fact, what I call "active meditation." This means that you are not simply observing what is going on. You are doing something with the breath.

The other important topic is how you can feel the breath anywhere in the body. A further refinement is to play with different types of breathing to see what effect they have. You can breathe short on the in-breath and long on the out-breath. You can reverse that. You can breathe short on both the in-breath and the out-breath, and likewise breathe long on the in-breath and the out-breath. This begins to give you a sense of the range of experience you can have using the breath. It becomes an active part of your meditative toolbox. You get to know the effects of different kinds of breathing, and you can use them as necessary. When the mind is dull, apply the appropriate breath antidote. When the mind is restless, likewise. This is how you begin to make the mind workable.

Most of us live our lives at the mercy of our habits and conditioning. They are in control. Meditation is a way to train the mind in order for us

to get that control back. Usually, our thoughts and emotions are in charge.

The way I described allowing the attention to expand to fill the whole body is a passive way to do this. You just let it happen naturally. However, you can also try to do this actively. Take your attention on the breath and expand it to fill the body. If this does not work for you at this point, do not worry about it. Just know that this is possible.

Finally, on the out-breath, try to breathe out through the entire body. It is as if the physical body is inside a cocoon of energy. As with all of these practices, if you cannot feel this in the beginning, do not worry about it. Just breathe in whatever way you find pleasant. But know that eventually this feeling of bodily breath energy may actually become stronger than your feeling of the physical body. The sense of the physical body will fade into the background, and the sense of the “breath body” will become strong.

Coming Back to the Breath

Inevitably your attention will wander. We have a lifetime of experience doing that, and in the modern world we have raised the quality of distraction to high art. Reversing that trend will take time.

When you see that your mind has wandered off of the breath, the first thing to do is see this is a good thing. It is a moment of awareness. This is one of the things we are trying to cultivate. Most people never have a moment like this. Congratulate yourself.

Next, you want to bring your attention back to the breath. How you do this is extremely important. You want to take several pleasant breaths. Breathe in a way that feels good.

Ajahn Brahm, who is the abbot of Bodhinyana monastery in Australia, uses the term the “beautiful breath.” What constitutes the beautiful breath depends on the circumstances. If you are feeling a lot of stress, the

beautiful breath may be very deep and long. In other circumstances, it may be short, or short in and long out. This is part of the skill of meditation. You are developing skills. But you have to be the one who knows how and when to use these skills. Meditation is a uniquely personal thing.

There is both an art and a craft to meditation. If you take 20 gifted young artists and you put them into an art school, and they all take the same courses, still no two of them will produce the same art. You are learning skills, getting to know the mind, and putting some tools in your meditative toolbox. That is the craft of meditation. However, eventually you will become an artist. That is when your unique path in meditation will become very personal, and that will start to happen very early in the process.

Quieting the Mind

The final step in these instructions is to quiet the mind. This is not easy. A great deal of meditation time is spent trying to quiet the mind.

A mind that is always racing about is not a very good instrument. In order to see the things that we need to see, the mind must be quiet.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu says that quieting the mind is like going into a house where the refrigerator is running. When it stops running, suddenly you hear all the other noises that you could not hear before. In order to see the subtle things that we need to see, we need to get the mind to settle down.

Serenity, tranquility, and calm also have many other benefits. We are less reactive. We are less self-centered. We begin to connect more with people. We are more compassionate and understanding. We have less anxiety, anger, and fear. We crave less. We are more at peace with the world. We are more at peace with ourselves. The quiet mind is wiser and more skillful. The benefits are almost endless.

In the next chapter I describe other methods for getting the mind concentrated. However, everything that follows is an expansion of what is here. We start by focusing our attention on a single spot, which at this stage is the nose. Then we expand our awareness to the whole body. Then we expand it still further to the mind, to get it quieter. These three things are kept in balance. In the first phase of meditation training, this is the objective.

Watching Your Thoughts

I will give you one other thing to play with here. You may not be able to see this at first, but you can actually watch your thoughts. Normally in breath meditation, most of your attention is on the breath. This is your foreground attention. Your background attention focuses on everything else. This background attention is always present. It is why you can be doing one thing and suddenly see something else, like a car driving by.

Larry Rosenberg uses the 80-20 rule; 80% of your attention is on the breath and 20% is on everything else.

However, you can also reverse that percentage and put 20% of your attention on the breath and 80% on something else. This is one of the fundamental principles in “*ānāpānasati*,” mindfulness of breathing. We start by making the breath the object of meditation. Then we use the breath as a way to stabilize the mind, to give it a kind of rhythm, a heartbeat. We use that heartbeat to look at other things. In this case, we have already done that by expanding our awareness to the whole body.

In the case of our thoughts, we put 20% of the attention on the breath and the other 80% on our minds. Then you can see thoughts actually forming. Like everything else in life they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. One of the things you can use this type of meditation for is to quiet the mind. Sometimes by watching the thoughts, they will go away.

What usually happens when you think is that one thought arises, and this begins a proliferation of thoughts. You are watching the breath and a

thought arises, and suddenly your attention to the breath is lost. You are chasing a thought stream. You get lost in a world that exists only in your mind.

Watching your thoughts has almost endless possibilities. You can see where in the mind a thought arises. You can catch the thought so it does not proliferate. Even more subtly you can stop it dead in its tracks. You can actually keep it from finishing. It is a fascinating process.

You have probably guessed that this is not easy. However, I introduce it here as another way to get the mind a little quieter. If focusing on the breath is not working, you may try simply watching your thoughts.

Dedication of Merit

“Bhikkhus, there are these three bases of meritorious activity. What three? The basis of meritorious activity consisting in giving; the basis of meritorious activity consisting in virtuous behavior; and the basis of meritorious activity consisting in meditative development.” - [AN 8.36]

One of the traditions in Buddhism is making merit. As you can see from the Buddha’s words, this is done in three ways: generosity, virtue, and the practice of meditation. Every time that you meditate, you are making merit for yourself and others. It is another way of saying that you are creating good karma.

It is customary at the end of a meditation session to dedicate the merit of your effort to all beings. The effort that goes into meditation is not just for you; it is for the health and well-being of everyone.

There are a number of ways of dedicating merit. At the Abhayagiri Monastery in California, they chant the *Reflection on Sharing Blessings*. You can also simply recite these words:

May the merit of this effort be shared by all beings, so that they may be happy.

This brings us full circle to when we established a mental posture and remembered why we practice. It is for our own happiness and for the happiness of all beings.

In addition, you may dedicate the merit of your meditation to a specific person. This person may be alive or dead. You can do this for someone who is going through a difficult time or someone who died to whom you want to send positive karmic energy. You can do this in any way that you like, something like:

May the merit of this effort be dedicated to [someone], so that they may find peace and harmony.

The words can be whatever you want.

Finally, as you get up from your meditation, stay in touch with the breath. Do this throughout the day. Keep coming back to the breath as a way of connecting to the present moment. And also keep the good spirit in your heart that comes from the dedication of merit. By meditating, you are doing a noble act with a noble intention.

Summary

This chapter introduces the fundamental approach to breath meditation:

1. Find a spot on which to focus and watch the breath coming in and out.
2. Passively or actively expand the attention to include the whole body.
3. When the mind wanders, bring your attention back to the breath by breathing in a way that feels good.
4. When you feel it is possible, further expand your awareness to include the mind to get the mind to settle down.

5. Try watching your thoughts as a way to quiet the mind.
6. When your meditation period ends, dedicate the merit of your effort to all beings.

More Meditation Techniques

From what I've observed in my own practice, there is only one path that is short, easy, effective and pleasant, and at the same time has hardly anything to lead you astray: the path of keeping the breath in mind, the same path the Lord Buddha himself used with such good results.

- [Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*]

The instructions given in the previous chapter are probably enough to keep you going for a very long time, perhaps, as Thich Nhat Hanh said, many decades. To be sure, we will be going into some detail on what breath meditation reveals, and we will expand the use of the breath to investigate other topics of meditation.

The instructions just given are relatively simple. But just because something is simple that does not mean it is easy. In baseball, pitchers spend their entire careers trying to throw the same pitches over and over, and batters try to perfect the art of hitting those pitches. Conceptually both actions are easy to understand and easy to explain. They are, however, extremely difficult to do consistently.

So over the centuries many techniques were developed to cultivate a stable, concentrated, tranquil mind. A few of them are described here.

There are an almost infinite number of meditation techniques. This points to how hard it is to fully develop concentration. You should feel free to experiment. Just keep in mind that the goal at this point is to a) develop a broad-based form of concentration and b) to quiet the mind. If the meditation technique that you choose does not satisfy these criteria, it will be counterproductive.

Another Beautiful Breath

This first technique is quite simple but satisfies the criteria for being a “beautiful breath.” It combines both active and passive breath meditation.

In order to do this type of meditation, you must be able to experience whole body awareness. You must be able to feel the breath energy expand to fill the whole body.

In this technique, when you breathe in take control of the breath and breathe in until the breath energy expands to fill the whole body. You will have to play with the breath to feel when the breath energy is full enough but not too full. One way to do this is to “bracket,” that is, intentionally breath in too deeply and, conversely, breath in a way that is clearly too shallow. The correct level of breathing will be in between. It should feel good.

Now when you begin to breathe out, simply let go of any control of the breath and let the breath exhale naturally. It is like sliding down a playground slide. Now you just watch the breath and feel it as it goes out naturally. It should come to a nice, calm, quiet conclusion. In Zen they call this “letting go into silence.”

This type of breathing is especially soothing and satisfying. It is also a good introduction to simply letting the breath be.

Breath Counting

The next meditation technique is breath counting. When I started to meditate I was in a Zen group, and this is what they taught me. I still find it useful.

There are many ways to count the breaths. The first way is to count once at the beginning of the in-breath and once again on the out-breath. If you are new to meditation this is the place to start.

The next way to count breaths is to either just count on the in-breath or the out-breath. Try both to see which works best for you.

If you can see your thoughts try this experiment. See whether your thoughts tend to begin on the in-breath or the out-breath or both. If one is dominant, count those breaths. My thoughts tend to start on the in-breath, so counting in-breaths works best for me. But see how it is for you. See which method of counting helps get your mind settled, and which one helps you concentrate better.

See if you can get to a point where you can count just the in-breath or the out-breath, ten breaths, three times in a row. When I started, it took me several months to get to this point. It takes time.

Once you can consistently get to 30, switch to using just a single word, like “in” on the in-breath and “out” on the out-breath. In Thailand, they use the word “buddho,” which means “awake.” They say (silently) “bud” on the in-breath and “dho” on the out-breath.

When you can use “in-out” or “buddho” consistently, you can drop the noting word and simply follow the breath.

One way to combine these is to use a countdown timer that repeats. Set it to four iterations of five minutes each. For the first five minutes, count both the in-breath and the out-breath. For the next five minutes, count just the in-breath or the out-breath. For the next five minutes, use a noting word, and for the last five minutes, just follow the breath.

You can do breath counting or use a noting word off of the cushion as well. Put 20% of your attention on the breath and start counting or noting. This can be done while walking, driving, etc., and can be a pleasant way to calm down and be more in the present moment. If you are driving, of course, make sure that you pay proper attention to that. The world needs all the meditators it can get.

Sweeping

Sweeping is one of my favorite practices. It can have several different purposes. Here we are using it to develop tranquility and concentration.

There are many different ways to do sweeping. This approach is the one that I have come to favor after many years of trying various techniques. It emphasizes the energy centers and flows in the body, particularly the chakras. However, there are other ways to do it, and as usual you should feel free to try others. But this is the one that I think gives optimal results.

Before I describe sweeping, it is useful for you to know something about the chakras. Chakras are energy centers in the body. Just as the body as a whole is energy, within the whole-body energy system, there are places where the energy is stronger. Each center has different qualities associated with it. The major chakras are the top of the head, the forehead, the throat, the center of the chest, the base of the sternum, the abdomen, and the base of the spine.

There are also minor chakras. There are two in particular that are very helpful in breath meditation. Those are in the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. However, as you work with the body, you may find energy centers almost anywhere. The Thai Forest Monk Ajahn Lee had a strong energy center at the base of the neck. This is part of the fun of meditation, this process of discovery. You are getting to know your body in an intimate way. And it is not static. It may and will be different on different days.



Figure: The Major Chakras

Conversely, you will have more trouble feeling the breath energy in other areas. Joints can act like closed valves that prevent the breath energy from flowing into the extremities. Energy tends to flow along the long bones, but the energy may not flow along one or more of them. Simply try to get the breath energy flowing. Work on an area until the effort is not producing any result, and then move on to the next spot.

If it is not clear already, in breath meditation, you start by picking one spot through which to follow the breath energy. You can do this for as long as you like. You want to establish yourself at that point.

If this proves to be a problem, one option is to change the point at which you are following the breath. You can follow it pretty much anywhere in the body. Try moving the point up or down in the body and see what that does. If you are having trouble maintaining focus at the nose, for example, try moving it down into the abdomen, or all the way down to

the soles of the feet. The chakras are good places to try.

An alternative is to pick two or three different spots at which to follow the breath. This can work well because you have to balance your attention across multiple spots. It forces you to use more energy. It also facilitates the flow of bodily energies. These can be any spots you want. For example, you can use the nose, the palms of the hands, and the soles of the feet.

When doing spot meditation, you usually breathe in and out through that spot or spots. An alternative is to breathe in through the primary spot or spots, and then out through another spot. For example, you can breathe in through the soles of the feet, and out through the crown chakra. This draws the energy up from the feet, through the whole body, and out through the top of the head. You can go the other way as well.

Once you can establish focus in this way, your attention will either expand naturally to fill the whole body, or you can try and make that happen. In time you will be able to do these two basic steps – starting with one or more points and then expanding to the whole body – easily. If you expand to the whole body and then have trouble maintaining focus, go back to your original spot(s).

Once you expand your awareness to the whole body, when you breathe out, you want to breathe out through the whole body. You want to breathe out into the air. You may have a sense of the bodily energy diffusing into the surrounding air. This can be incredibly soothing and relaxing.

When the attention wanders, when you catch yourself, breathe in and out for several breaths in a particularly beautiful way. It should feel good.

When you are doing the sweeping practice, you work with each spot in the same way. The difference is that rather than picking a spot or spots with which to work, you will work through the body in a systematic way. When you have done a lot of this more structured work, you will get a feel for how different types of breathing work for you. This is a

great advantage, especially for less experienced meditators. It won't tell you all the possibilities for how to work with the breath – which is almost endless – but you will begin to get a sense of how the energies feel to you in your body, and how they work for you.

The next step is to understand when to use which technique. Suppose you have tension at the temples. This usually means that you want to draw the energy down. You can switch to the abdomen or the soles of the feet. Or you can breathe out through the whole head, drawing the tension out. Or you can start at the temples and draw the energy of the in-breath to another spot, like the base of the spine.

There are no fixed rules. Treat it as an experiment. Try something for a few minutes and see what the results are. Be patient, and give each strategy a chance. Most people eventually develop a set of strategies that works for them. It is uniquely personal. Everyone will experience things differently.

Some people criticize this as being too concerned with technique. It can be, and you want to watch out for that. But this is a skill. Compare it to baseball. Hitters and pitchers and fielders make adjustments on almost every pitch depending on the situation. If a hitter has two strikes on him/her, he/she may choke up on the bat, protect the plate, and try to hit the ball to the opposite field. Fielders may shade toward the opposite field to guard against that. If there are less than three balls, the pitcher may try to throw it out of the strike zone and get the batter to chase a bad pitch. That is just one situation, and it does not take into account the inning, score, runners on base, the number of outs, or the skills of the players involved. They make constant and often subtle adjustments.

This is the skill of meditation. It takes years and years and years for great athletes to become skilled baseball players. It is the same way with meditation. And things always change. Your life situation will change. Sometimes you will be healthy, at other times not. You will age. You will move, change jobs, go in and out of relationships.

This is why sweeping can be such an effective practice. It slows things down. If you are having a problem, you can walk your way systematically through the body and see what makes a difference and in what way. You may have been meditating for years and years, but then something changes. Sweeping gets you back to a place where you can hit the meditational reset button. But also remember that you can breathe in and out in so many different ways. This type of sweeping meditation gives you a taste of the possibilities, but it is just a taste.

For this type of sweeping, start by using the abdomen as your primary center of attention. Breathe in through the abdomen, expanding your awareness to the whole body, then either breathe out through the whole body, or back out through the abdomen.

Then start moving your way up, to the solar plexus, the heart center, and the base of the throat. Take your time.

Then move your attention into the center of the head. Breathe in through all of the openings: the nose, the eyes, and the ears. Breathe out through the whole head. Look for any tension, especially in the joints of the jaw and the temples. Try and get everything relaxed.

If you have a lot of attention in the upper body or the head, you can try breathing out through the soles of the feet, or possibly the abdomen, somewhere lower in the body.

Remember always that we are trying to establish a feeling of comfort and ease. It is very natural to actually tense up while you are trying to relax. Something doesn't work, so you "try harder," and this just makes things worse. If the tension gets too pronounced, try just taking some nice, deep breaths, filling the whole body with ease.

When working with the head, you can also use the chakras there. One of them is in the forehead. This is the "mind's eye," "Dhamma eye," or "third eye." You can breathe in through the third eye, through the head, and all the way down and out the soles of the feet. This is just a suggestion. You can breathe in and out however and wherever you want.

The other chakra in the head is at the crown of the head. The crown chakra is quite interesting. It is associated with consciousness itself. The Tibetans have a practice of “conscious dying” in which they work with getting the consciousness to leave the body through the crown chakra. Work with it and see how it feels to you. You may feel a slight tingling.

Once you make your way into the head, you have experienced most of the major chakras. You may experience the chakras in different ways. Some people feel them as energy centers. I think this is quite common. (That is actually what they are.) You may also feel a swirling pool of energy, like water going down a drain. Some people experience the chakras as light. Each chakra has a different color associated with it:

1. The root chakra (base of the spine) is red.
2. The sacral chakra (just below the belly button) is orange.
3. The solar plexus chakra is yellow.
4. The heart chakra is green.
5. The throat chakra is blue.
6. The third eye is indigo.
7. The crown chakra is either purple or white.

This may – will – take time. In meditation, you never know when something will happen. You may struggle for months just to work your way through the body, then one day you will feel a strong energy somewhere, or maybe that whirlpool of energy or a bright light. When this happens, you will probably be startled and will pull back. That is fine and completely normal. Over time, you will get used to it, and it will work its way into your comfort zone. You will enjoy it. There is a feeling of empowerment as you gain mastery over this disorderly mind.

Once you are as settled as you can get in the head, move your attention to the base of the neck. On the in-breath, breathe down the arms and out the fingers. You may feel beams of energy going out of the fingers. On the out-breath, breathe out through the arms. Let the energy dissipate into the surrounding air.

When the neck and arms feel as settled as you can get them, breathe from the base of the neck and down both sides of the spine down to the base of the spine. The base of the spine is the final major chakra. Breathe out from the spine into the surrounding air.

Once you have worked the spine to your satisfaction, move your attention to the base of the spine. On the in-breath, breathe down through the legs and out the toes. As with the fingers, you may feel beams of energy flowing out of the toes. On the out-breath, breathe out through the legs into the surrounding air.

This completes one sweep of the body.

There is quite a lot here with which to work. Take your time, as always. Be patient, and be kind to yourself. Let it unfold. Plant your seeds. Water the ground. Pull the weeds. The seeds will sprout when they are ready.

Sweeping is especially good at fostering a broad sense of awareness. At a certain point when you breathe in, the breath energy will flow to fill the whole body. Sweeping is a way of breaking the body down into energy channels. Eventually, you will be able to put all the pieces back together. You will feel the whole body on the in-breath and the whole body on the out-breath. That is what we are after. There will be some days where the energy flows freely as soon as you start to do breath meditation. On other days it will not flow as well. This is an indication that sweeping may help you.

You can do this sweeping practice for as long as it is useful. I heard about a retreat where all they did for the first six months was sweeping. You can make this your main practice. Once you feel it no longer has value, you can use it as necessary, such as on days when the breath energy is not flowing freely. You can also do it just for fun. It is a very soothing practice, and there is nothing wrong with doing something just because it's fun. This is the "pleasure born of seclusion." There is no danger in this type of pleasure. It is very pleasant, and it was a fundamental part of his journey to enlightenment.

Many people think that meditation is dull, hard, serious work. That is contrary to what we are trying to do here. The objective is to develop a state of mind that has joy and happiness as its primary traits. It is hard to do that if you are feeling grumpy. The purpose of the entire first stage of training is to establish a sense of well-being, a place of safety and comfort. It is your home base. If you never do anything in your meditation practice but that, you will be better off than almost everyone else on the planet.

There is a very good guided meditation on the Internet for this type of sweeping meditation. You can find it by searching for "[youtube chakra sweeping meditation](#)."

Summary

We have added a number of useful breath meditation techniques:

1. A new type of breathing practice
2. Breath counting and noting
3. Body sweeping

Problems While Meditating

Everyone encounters problems and difficult patches in the course of meditating, so don't let them get you upset. Don't view them as signs that you're making no progress or that you're a hopeless meditator. Problems are an excellent opportunity for figuring out where you have unskillful habits and learning how to do something about them. This is what develops your discernment. In fact, the process of learning how to deal with the two most common problems in meditation, pain and wandering thoughts, is what has brought many people in the past to awakening.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each & Every Breath*]

The mind is a complex thing, and when you meditate, a myriad of problems come up. I can't cover every possible contingency, so I am going to address the most common issues. The most important principle to remember is that at this stage in your meditation practice, the goal is to cultivate concentration and tranquility. Any activity or meditation practice that aids that process is helpful. Anything else is not.

There will come a time when turning your attention toward a painful mind state will be the practice. Many teachers tell you to do it at this point, at an early stage of your practice. You can do that now, but it is an extremely challenging and painful way to proceed. What we are trying to do is to lay a groundwork of well-being so that those difficult mind states become more workable.

Breathing Through the Distraction

The most common problem is simply staying with the breath. There are two methods that I find work in most cases. The first one is breathing

through the problem. Put yourself in a frame of mind where you are keeping most of your attention on the breath and some of your attention on your thoughts (i.e., the 80-20 rule). When you see a thought begin to arise, breathe right through it.

Another category of problems is when there is a personal issue that is very strong. This may be a powerful emotion like fear, or a problem like death, illness, divorce, or a lost job. See if you can breathe through those thoughts as well.

Apropos of difficult life issues, I have already mentioned the practice of mettā, loving-kindness. Later we will discuss a more formal way to do this. For now, if you are in a difficult life situation, it is helpful to know that part of mettā practice is to wish good will for all living beings. Somewhere in the world, at any time and in many places, there are people doing this practice. You are a living being, so someone is always wishing you true happiness. In some Buddhist countries they believe that mettā is an energy, and they direct it to those who suffer. This includes people who are not in the human realm. There are good-hearted people everywhere who want nothing more than for you to find peace and happiness.

Have a Little Conversation with Yourself

The meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein once commented on how much he likes to think, and what a problem that is for him. I don't think he is alone in that. We give our thoughts such power and importance. And when you are doing sitting meditation, it is a perfect opportunity to do just that. We aren't doing anything else, so why not think?

Some thoughts are useful. Remember the rule: anything that helps improve concentration and tranquility is helpful. You have to use the thinking process to see what is going on in your mind and to make adjustments. The Buddha called this "directed thought and evaluation." You direct your thoughts to the process of maintaining concentration, and you evaluate what is going on so you stay with the breath.

However, chances are that most of your thoughts are not of this type. And sometimes you have a problem, and you talk yourself into thinking that it is OK to work on that while you are meditating. Our mind has all sorts of rationalizations to keep us from doing what we are supposed to be doing.

Sometimes you can have a little talk with yourself. Tell yourself that yes, this is an important topic, but for this period of time it has to be put on hold. This time is precious. You can think about that problem when you are done sitting.

One of the things that can happen when the mind gets quiet is that some problems solve themselves. This is because of how the mind solves problems. People who have studied this process say that it happens in two steps. The first step is a programming phase. That is when we gather information, and this is a conscious, intellectual process. The second phase, however, happens in the subconscious. In that phase, the intellectual part of the mind has to quiet down so the subconscious can do its work. This is why you can be struggling with a problem, and then you go for a walk or do housework, and minutes later the solution presents itself. You can even solve problems in your sleep.

Many people on retreat have had this happen. I have solved engineering problems that way. Figuring out how to handle family and work and life problems can happen in this way. So if you are trying to negotiate your way out of thinking about something, it might be helpful to remember that a quiet mind is pretty good at working things out.

We usually think of our minds as being one, monolithic thing. But inside our minds are many voices. It is like the cartoons where an angel is on one shoulder and the devil is on the other, and they are arguing. Unfortunately, it is worse than just two voices. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that our mind is like a committee, and not a well-functioning one. It is like the "Chicago city council." That reference is a little dated, but I think you get the idea. One of the things that we need to learn how to do is sort out the committee members, to make the wise ones more powerful, and

stop listening to the foolish ones. We have to make the angel on our shoulder win the argument.

The Five Hindrances

The two methods I just described are not canonical. The Buddha never mentioned them. However, he did famously list five hindrances to meditation:

“There are five impediments and hindrances, overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight. What five?

“Sensual desire is an impediment and hindrance, an overgrowth of the mind that stultifies insight. Ill-will... Sloth and torpor... Restlessness and remorse... Skeptical doubt are impediments and hindrances, overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight.

“Without having overcome these five, it is impossible for a monk whose insight thus lacks strength and power, to know his own true good, the good of others, and the good of both; nor will he be capable of realizing that superhuman state of distinctive achievement, the knowledge and vision enabling the attainment of sanctity.

“But if a monk has overcome these five impediments and hindrances, these overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight, then it is possible that, with his strong insight, he can know his own true good, the good of others, and the good of both; and he will be capable of realizing that superhuman state of distinctive achievement, the knowledge and vision enabling the attainment of sanctity.” - [AN 5:51]

Sense Desire



“Suppose there were a bowl of water mixed with lac, turmeric, blue dye, or crimson dye. If a man with good sight were to examine his own facial reflection in it, he would not know and see it as it really is. So too, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by sensual lust, and one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen sensual lust, on that occasion one does not know and see as it really is one’s own good, the good of others, and the good of both.” - [AN 5.193]

One of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha is that craving is at the root of our unhappiness. We get a thought or some sensation and suddenly we want food, sex, etc. We are overcome by a sense of wanting. We live lives that in ways subtle and not-so-subtle are dictated by our addictions. And to be clear, the Buddha’s way is not about denial, but it is about freedom, being free from our habits, conditions, and cravings.

It is useful to think about craving in terms of addiction. It is something over which we do not have control. We smell food and suddenly we are

hungry. We see an attractive woman or man, and we want to have sex with them. These are all compulsions. There is no free choice involved. And it gets us into all sorts of mischief. Imagine what it would be like to be free from all that.

In this case, we are talking specifically about what happens on the cushion. We have several committee members who want nothing more than to fantasize.

One thing that happens to all desires is that they fade away as our concentration improves. We replace sense desire with the “pleasure born of seclusion.” Seclusion has two aspects to it. The first is physical seclusion. This is why monks and nuns go off to monasteries. It is easier to quiet the mind when there are fewer distractions.

The second meaning of seclusion is seclusion from sense desire. This is an internal phenomenon. When the mind is quiet and concentrated, it is also secluded from sense desire. If the person is skilled enough, this can happen in any external circumstance, even one with lots of external distractions.

The pleasure born of seclusion is free from the mischief-making that is inherent in sense desire. No one ever committed a crime or started a war because they were too serene. There are no crimes of dispassion.

Sexual desire is, of course, the most powerful type of desire. The Buddha had a few tricks to help us with those. One is to put the aging process on fast forward:

“And what, bhikkhus, is the gratification in the case of material form? Suppose there were a girl of the noble class or the brahmin class or of householder stock, in her fifteenth or sixteenth year, neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair. Is her beauty and loveliness then at its height?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Now the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on that beauty and loveliness are the gratification in the case of material form.

“And what, bhikkhus, is the danger in the case of material form? Later on one might see that same woman here at eighty, ninety, or a hundred years, aged, as crooked as a roof bracket, doubled up, supported by a walking stick, tottering, frail, her youth gone, her teeth broken, grey-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, with limbs all blotchy. What do you think, bhikkhus? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Bhikkhus, this is a danger in the case of material form.” - [AN 13.18-19]

This is a lesson in how fleeting and unsatisfactory physical beauty is.

Another practice for overcoming sense desire is the “contemplation of the body parts”:

“...a bhikkhu reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, bounded by skin, as full of many kinds of impurity thus: ‘In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.’ Just as though there were a bag with an opening

at both ends full of many sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice, and a man with good eyes were to open it and review it thus: 'This is hill rice, this is red rice, these are beans, these are peas, this is millet, this is white rice'; so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body...as full of many kinds of impurity thus: 'In this body there are head-hairs... and urine.'" - [MN 10.10]

Here we are invited to look into the deep nature of the body. We start with our own body. Then make this contemplation "externally," meaning that the bodies of others are exactly the same. If you strip the skin off of that attractive person, they won't look very attractive.

If these practices seem a little extreme to you, do not worry about it. Play with them if and when you feel like it. We will be going into greater detail on the teachings on impermanence and stress at a later time.

Nonetheless, this gives you three tools to help with distraction due to sense pleasure: concentration, aging, and contemplation of body parts. Of these, concentration is certainly the most pleasant option.

III Will



“Suppose there were a bowl of water being heated over a fire, bubbling and boiling. If a man with good sight were to examine his own facial reflection in it, he would not know and see it as it really is. So too, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, and one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one does not know and see as it really is one’s own good, the good of others, and the good of both.” - [AN 5.193]

The hindrance of ill will covers a variety of similar feelings: fear, anxiety, anger, etc. The traditional antidote to ill will is mettā, wishing good will for yourself and others.

If the problem is anxiety or fear, the method is to wish mettā for yourself, as we discussed in Establishing a Mental Posture. One thing you might try, in addition, is to place the focus on the center of the chest when you do this. That is the heart chakra. It is the epicenter of loving-kindness. A second focal point to try is the base of the sternum which is the center of

self-confidence. This is more helpful if the problem is anxiety.

If the problem is anger or ill will toward someone else, the process is very similar. Start by feeling loving-kindness for someone you really love and care about. Get in touch with that feeling. Then transfer that feeling to the other person. Remember, everyone wants happiness. We were all babies once, and someone loved that baby, even if they are giving you problems now. This does not mean that you have to agree with them or like what they are doing. *Mettā* is the love that a parent has for a child. It does not necessarily mean that you approve of what they are doing. But it does mean that you will love them no matter what.

Many years ago, there was a book written by Norman Mailer called *The Executioner's Song*. It is about Gary Gilmore, who was the first person put to death following a long ban on capital punishment by the Supreme Court. Gilmore was a sociopath who murdered two people.

As you can imagine, he came from a pretty dysfunctional background. But his mother, who was fully aware of what he had done and what kind of person he was, still loved him. She pleaded for mercy to the court simply on the grounds that she loved him. She asked as a mother that they not kill her only child.

This is from the “*Mettā Sutta: The Discourse on Loving-kindness*”:

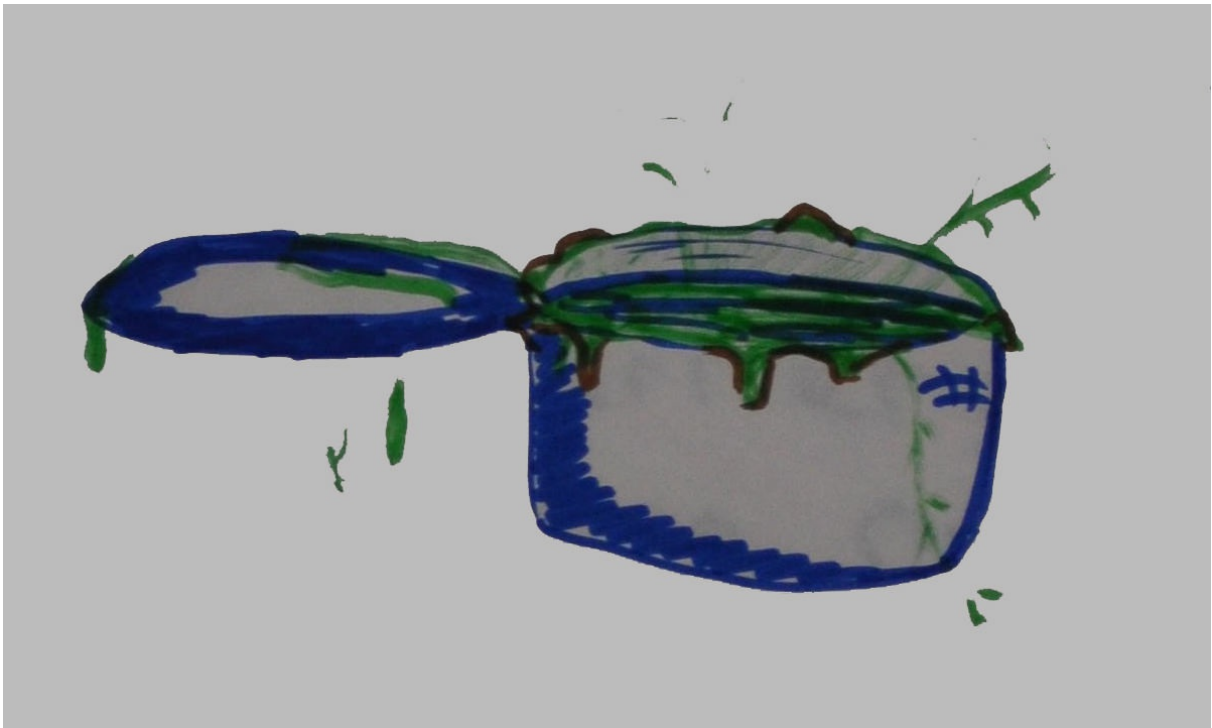
*Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings; - [SN 1.8]*

If you find that you simply cannot feel *mettā* toward this person, an alternative is compassion. People who do unwholesome things suffer more from those acts than anyone else. So you can try feeling compassion for how much suffering they are causing themselves through their unskillful behavior. It is their ignorance that causes them to make their lives, now and in the future, full of great unhappiness.

If compassion does not work, try to establish equanimity. Be even-keeled. Put the problem into a bigger space. Will this be a problem in 100 years? This is not to push the problem away or act like it doesn't exist. It is just to have some perspective. Even momentous historical events fade into the past.

A week before my 18th birthday my father died. I love my father and I still think about him. But life moves on if you let it. A friend of mine uses the phrase "living around" these events. You don't act like something never happened, but you don't indulge it, either. You develop a balanced view about it.

Sloth and Torpor



"Suppose there were a bowl of water covered over with algae and water plants. If a man with good sight were to examine his own facial reflection in it, he would not know and see it as it really is. So too, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by dullness and

drowsiness, and one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen dullness and drowsiness, on that occasion one does not know and see as it really is one's own good, the good of others, and the good of both." - [AN 5.193]

So you are sitting on the cushion trying your best to keep your attention on the breath, and... zzzzzzz... you are mind-bogglingly sluggish. You may even fall asleep.

I heard a story once about a Zen master who was leading a sesshin, which is a Zen retreat. Everyone in the hall was diligently practicing, waiting for him to speak. Time went on and on and on and finally... all they could hear was the sound of him snoring.

There is a famous Buddhist from the 20th century named Dīpa Ma. She was an extraordinary practitioner. She married at the age of 12. She had three children, two of whom died. Her husband, who she had come to love deeply, also died. She fell into deep despair. She was emotionally crippled. One day her doctor told her that if she did not do something to turn her life around, she would simply die.

She went to a monastery in her home country of Burma. But she was so dysfunctional that she could not even walk properly. She had to drag herself up the steps of the monastery to meditate. She later recounted that before she went to the monastery she could not sleep, and once she started to meditate, all she could do was sleep.

Sometimes the mind simply needs to shut down. It is a defense mechanism. While I am about to offer some antidotes to sloth and torpor, if you have suffered a trauma, be kind to yourself. Show yourself at least as much compassion as you would for your most beloved person.

The Buddha gave a great deal of advice on overcoming this hindrance. His most complete instructions are from the *Anguttara Nikāya*:

Once the Exalted One spoke to the Venerable Maha-Moggallāna thus: “Are you drowsy, Moggallāna? Are you drowsy, Moggallāna?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“Well then, Moggallāna, at whatever thought torpor has befallen you, to that thought you should not give attention, you should not dwell on it frequently. Then it is possible that, by so doing, torpor will disappear.

“But if, by so doing, that torpor does not disappear, you should think and reflect within your mind about the Dhamma as you have heard and learned it, and you should mentally review it. Then it is possible that, by so doing, torpor will disappear.

“But if, by so doing, that torpor does not disappear, you should learn by heart the Dhamma in its fullness, as you have heard and learned it. Then it is possible...

“But if, by so doing, that torpor does not disappear, you should shake your ears, and rub your limbs with the palm of your hand. Then it is possible...

“But if, by so doing, that torpor does not disappear, you should get up from your seat, and after washing your eyes with water, you should look around in all directions and look upwards to the stars in the sky. Then it is possible...

“But if, by so doing, that torpor does not disappear, you should firmly establish the (inner) perception of light: as it is by day, so also by night; as it is by night, so also by

day. Thus with a mind clear and unobstructed, you should develop a consciousness which is full of brightness. Then it is possible...

“But if, by so doing, that torpor does not disappear, you should, conscious of that which is before and behind, walk up and down, with your senses turned inwards, with your mind not going outwards. Then it is possible...

“But if, by so doing, that torpor does not disappear, you may lie down on your right side, taking up the lion’s posture, covering foot with foot - mindful, clearly conscious, keeping in mind the thought of rising. Having awakened again, you should quickly rise, thinking: ‘I won’t indulge in the enjoyment of lying down and reclining, in the enjoyment of sleep!’

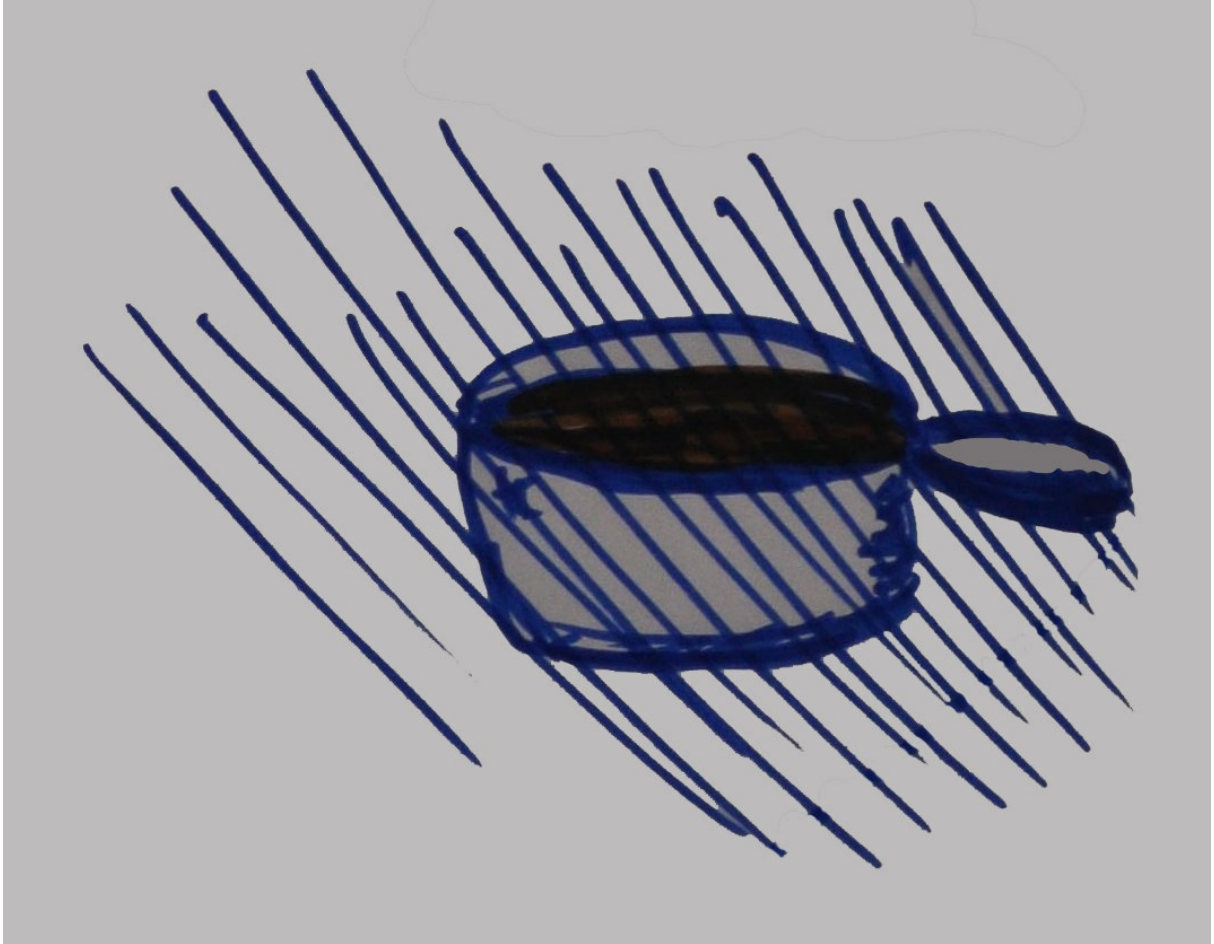
“Thus, Moggallāna, you should train yourself!” - [AN 7:58]

Even in the fifth century BCE in India, splashing a little water on your face was a remedy for sleepiness. And notice that when all else fails, there is nothing like a little sleep.

Another antidote to sleepiness is walking meditation. We have not covered that yet, but some brisk walking can be very helpful.

Finally, although this is not canonical, a little 5 Hour Energy can help. The Buddhist monk Manoj Bhargava developed 5 Hour Energy to facilitate meditation. It was not developed as an energy drink but something for “focus,” as he puts it. But the FDA would not let him market it as a “focus drink” because they do not have a category for something that helps you to concentrate.

Restlessness



“Suppose there were a bowl of water stirred by the wind, rippling, swirling, churned into wavelets. If a man with good sight were to examine his own facial reflection in it, he would not know and see it as it really is. So too, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by restlessness and worry, and one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen restlessness and worry, on that occasion one does not know and see as it really is one’s own good, the good of others, and the good of both.” - [AN 5.193]

The opposite of sloth and torpor is restlessness.

There you are, sitting on your cushion, there is a statue of the Buddha on the altar, and what you see is complete serenity and that Mona Lisa half-

smile on his face. This is what you want, right? You want a mind that is still and quiet and serene. And your mind and body simply won't cooperate. You are shifting and restless and your mind is going 90 mph (about 145 kph in Canada).

A number of the practices already discussed can be of help, most especially counting the breath and sweeping. Chanting, which we will discuss, can also help quiet the mind. You can do walking meditation. This can help settle the body, and that can then extend to the mind.

Restlessness will be with you for a long time. According to the Buddha, restlessness only goes away completely when you attain a full awakening. Sometimes it is helpful to just see it and not turn it into a problem.

Doubt



“Suppose there were a bowl of water that is cloudy, turbid, and muddy, placed in the dark. If a man with good sight were to examine his own facial reflection in it, he would not know and see it as it really is. So too, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by doubt,

and one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen doubt, on that occasion one does not know and see as it really is one's own good, the good of others, and the good of both." - [AN 5.193]

This means doubt in the Buddha's teaching and in the path that you are following. You practice and practice and practice and nothing is working. Doubt, in this case, can also mean doubt in yourself. You have faith in the path, but you are not sure that you will be able to follow it. (Hint: You can.)

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that he once went back through all of his teacher Ajahn Lee's Dharma talks, and 90% of them were about encouraging his students. This is a path that is going to have its ups and downs.

The antidote to doubt is faith. A lot of Westerners do not like to hear that word, faith. But there are many kinds of faith. The kind of faith to which people usually object is blind faith, believing in something that can never be proven. In the "Cankī Sutta: With Cankī" [MN 95] the Buddha took a dim view of such faith:

"There are five things, Bhāradvāja, that may turn out in two different ways here and now. What five? Faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoned cogitation, and reflective acceptance of a view. These five things may turn out in two different ways here and now. Now something may be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false; but something else may not be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistakable. Again, something may be fully approved of... well transmitted... well cogitated... well reflected upon, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false; but something else may not be well reflected upon, yet it may be factual, true, and unmistakable. [Under these

conditions] it is not proper for a wise man who preserves truth to come to the definite conclusion: 'Only this is true, anything else is wrong.'" - [MN 95.14]

"Oral tradition" is here because in India that is how everything was transmitted. It applies equally to "written tradition," which is what we have in the West. The point the Buddha was making here is that just because something is written down does not mean that it is true.

However, we do a lot of things in life on faith. People go to college because they have faith that it will lead to a better life. Of course, there is a body of evidence that this is (sometimes? usually?) the case. But it is faith, nonetheless.

In the Buddhist tradition there is great respect for "faith followers." According to the Buddha, there are two types of people who become awakened: Dharma followers and faith followers.

The disciple enters upon the first supramundane path either as a Dhamma-follower (dhammānusārin) or as a faith-follower (saddhānusārin); the former is one in whom wisdom is the dominant faculty, the latter one who progresses by the impetus of faith.

- [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli; Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Introduction]

Faith followers have such conviction in the Dharma that they awaken simply because they believe so strongly that it will happen. Awakening becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There is another kind of faith in Buddhism, and that is sometimes rendered as "confirmed confidence." When you start a meditation practice, you do not know if it is going to be of any value. But over time, with patience and persistence, you begin to see results. Thus, your initial faith transforms into confirmed confidence. You have some evidence that

the practice is working.

One thing that can be helpful in overcoming doubt is studying the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha's teachings hang together in a remarkably coherent way. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha described an important stage in the training where one has not yet awakened, but you have studied and pondered the Buddha's teachings enough to accept that they are true:

“Here, Mahānāma, some person does not possess confirmed confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. He is not one of joyous wisdom, nor of swift wisdom, and he has not attained liberation. However, he has these five things: the faculty of faith, the faculty of energy, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of wisdom. And the teachings proclaimed by the Tathāgata are accepted by him after being pondered to a sufficient degree with wisdom. This person too, Mahānāma, is one who does not go to hell, the animal realm, or the domain of ghosts, to the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world.” - [SN 55.24]

For help with self-doubt, it can be helpful to read the *Theragāthā* (*Verses of the Elder Monks*) and *Therīgāthā* (*Verses of the Elder Nuns*). There are tales of the struggles that many of them had on the path. This can help you realize that you are not alone. Many of the monks and nuns had problems that are far greater than most people will ever experience. They also confirm that the result is worth it.

Another antidote that the Buddha recommends is the company of good friends. In fact, he says that this is one of the criteria for an awakening. There is this often-quoted, heart-warming passage from the *Samyutta Nikāya* about this subject. It starts with a statement by the Buddha's attendant Ānanda:

[Ānanda:] “Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.”

[Buddha:] “Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.” - [SN 45.2]

I once had a teacher, someone with a Ph.D., who claimed that what the Buddha meant here is a metaphorical type of friendship, like a clear mind. He said that the Buddha did not mean real human beings. However, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* there are many passages that make it clear that what the Buddha meant by good friends is flesh and blood human beings. Here is just one of them:

“Bhikkhus, possessing eight qualities, a bhikkhu is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, an unsurpassed field of merit for the world. What eight?

“Here, a bhikkhu is virtuous... Having undertaken the training rules, he trains in them.

“He has learned much... and penetrated well by view.

“He has good friends, good companions, good comrades...” - [AN 8.56]

Sometimes you can over-think things.

Summary

In this section we discussed two methods for helping to keep the mind on the breath as well as the five hindrances to meditation:

1. Breathing through the distraction.
2. Having a conversation with yourself.

The Five Hindrances:

1. Sense desire
2. Ill will
3. Sloth and torpor
4. Restlessness
5. Doubt

Mettā and the Brahma Vihāras

...“mettā” is related to the word “mitta,” or friend. Universal mettā is friendliness for all. The fact that this friendliness equates with goodwill is shown in the four passages in the Canon where the Buddha recommends phrases to hold in mind to develop thoughts of mettā. These phrases provide his clearest guide not only to the heart-quality that underlies mettā, but also to the understanding of happiness that explains why it’s wise and realistic to develop mettā for all.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, [“When Goodwill is Better than Love: The Meaning of ‘Metta’”](#), Shambhala Sun, July 10, 2011]

The cultivation of mettā is part of a larger practice, that of the “brahma vihāras.” The word “brahma” means “noble,” and the word “vihāra” means “dwelling place.” Thus, “brahma vihāra” is usually translated as something like “noble abiding.”

The brahma vihāras are loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karuṇā), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (uppekhā). The Buddha described them in this way:

“Then, with his heart filled with loving-kindness, he dwells suffusing one quarter, the second, the third, the fourth. Thus he dwells suffusing the whole world, upwards, downwards, across, everywhere, always with a heart filled with loving-kindness, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill-will.

“Just as if a mighty trumpeter were with little difficulty to

make a proclamation to the four quarters, so by this meditation, Vasettha, by this liberation of the heart through loving-kindness he leaves nothing untouched, nothing unaffected in the sensuous sphere. This, Vasettha, is the way to union with Brahmā.

“Then with his heart filled with compassion,... with sympathetic joy, with equanimity he dwells suffusing one quarter, the second, the third, the fourth. Thus he dwells suffusing the whole world, upwards, downwards, across, everywhere, always with a heart filled with equanimity, abundant, unbounded, without hate or ill-will.” - [DN 13.76-78]

Here the Buddha described all four of the brahma vihāras. However, as a formal practice, mettā is the quality that gets the most emphasis. The [“Mettā Sutta”](#) [SN 1.8] is chanted regularly around the world.

Mettā

The Pāli commentaries say that the Buddha originally gave the instructions on mettā to monks who were harassed by the tree spirits of a forest in which the monks were trying to meditate. After doing this meditation, the spirits were so affected by the power of benevolence that they allowed the monks to stay in the forest for the duration of the rainy season retreat. (Internet search: [“metta buddharakkhita”](#))

As is often the case with anything that comes out of India, the distinction between myth and reality is blurred. However, I think the point is clear. Meeting conflict with conflict has an obvious result. Meeting conflict with love, compassion, and wisdom may have a somewhat better result. Of course, we are not wired in this way, and it takes a leap of faith, as well as some courage and conviction, to meet conflict with love, compassion, and equanimity.

The Buddha himself did not give a formal practice on how to cultivate mettā or any of the brahma vihāras. However, over time various practices evolved. For a classic treatment of mettā practice in the Burmese tradition, you may want to read Sharon Salzberg's book *Loving-kindness, the Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. Here I will give the instructions in brief.

The main practice consists of two parts: mettā phrases that are repeated and a mettā recipient.

Because the phrases are not canonical, you can really use anything that you like. The purpose is to establish a quality of heart, a feeling of unbounded love.

The important thing, therefore, is not that you repeat these phrases over and over in some mechanical way. That would hardly be useful. The most important thing is that quality of heart, the feeling of love. This is why I recommend that you begin by thinking of someone you love unconditionally, someone for whom you wish only unbounded happiness. Children and babies work well. Animals work well. Anyone for whom you have deep feelings of love and gratitude works well. As you think of them, get in touch with that feeling, especially at the heart center, the heart chakra, located at the center of the chest. Use the heart center as the focal point for the breath.

Once you have established the feeling of unbounded love, start by directing that feeling toward yourself, repeating the phrases:

May I be free from danger.

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May I be at ease.

Repeat them for a few minutes, as long as you like. As usual, this is not a race. Settle into the phrases and the feeling of loving-kindness.

Next, you direct mettā to a benefactor, someone who has been a loving and kind supporter to you:

May [they] be free from danger.
May [they] be happy.
May [they] be healthy.
May [they] be at ease.

Next comes a beloved friend:

May [they] be free from danger.
May [they] be happy.
May [they] be healthy.
May [they] be at ease.

The first three recipients of mettā are easy. These are people we love and care about.

Next comes a neutral person. This can be difficult. There are very few people about whom we have neither positive nor negative feelings. It may be someone who works in a shop or a neighbor who you do not know well. It may take a little time to come up with a person for whom you have neutral feelings:

May [they] be free from danger.
May [they] be happy.
May [they] be healthy.
May [they] be at ease.

The next one is the hardest one. In the commentaries, this person is rather dramatically called the “enemy.” It is probably not too hard to come up with this person:

May [they] be free from danger.
May [they] be happy.
May [they] be healthy.

May [they] be at ease.

And finally, we direct mettā toward all beings, seen and unseen:

May all beings be free from danger.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be healthy.

May all beings be at ease.

Clearly, wishing good will toward an enemy is the most difficult one. You may want to review the section on Ill Will in the chapter on Problems While Meditating.

The most important thing about mettā is that you understand that this is a quality to develop. For negative mind states like anxiety, anger, ill will, fear, etc., the antidote is mettā.

Here is also a good opportunity to say something about our minds and the issue of how they develop over a lifetime. In Buddhism we often use the word “practice.” This is to indicate that we are working at something and to get better at it.

But we are always practicing something. Every time that something manifests in the mind, our predisposition for that mind state gets stronger. If we have a lot of anger, every time that we get angry that strengthens the potential for anger. The next time the proper causes and conditions are in place, the anger will manifest even more quickly. This is why someone who is 20 years old who has a lot of anger will get angrier and angrier. By the time they are 60 or 80 no one can stand to be around them anymore. They have had a lot of time to practice, and they get really good at it.

What I just described is a mindless kind of practice. There is no self-awareness. What we are trying to cultivate is a mindful practice, one where we are clear about the qualities we want to develop in the mind. Simply knowing that we want to cultivate the brahma vihāras is

important.

Compassion

As mentioned before, and not surprisingly, directing mettā toward an enemy can be very challenging. In this case, directing compassion toward that person may work better. Thich Nhat Hanh defines love as the “intention and the capacity to make people happy.” He defines compassion (Pāli: karuṇā) as the “intention and the capacity to ease peoples’ suffering.” And when people are difficult, no one suffers because of that more than they do.

One example of this is driving. Everyone has experienced being cut off by an aggressive driver. But long after you have forgotten about it, that person still has to live inside that angry, unhappy mind. So you can feel happy that you are not like that, and you can feel compassion for someone who has to suffer from that mind.

Sympathetic Joy

The next brahma vihāra is muditā (Pāli). This is usually translated as “sympathetic joy.” In English, we don’t even have a word for it. We do have a word for its opposite, and that is jealousy. We even have a more dramatic version which is “schadenfreude.” That is delighting in someone’s misfortune. Muditā is feeling the same amount of joy for someone else’s happiness as we do for our own. So if someone has wonderful good fortune, we feel as happy for them as we would if that good fortune had come our way. It is a feeling that can only come from selflessness.

Equanimity

Finally, there is equanimity. This is the feeling of being even-keeled. We are neither repulsed by the negative nor attracted by the positive.

Many people confuse equanimity with indifference. In Buddhist

psychology there is the notion of near and far enemies. Far enemies are qualities that are the opposite of something. So the far enemy of “love” is “hate.” The far enemy of “compassion” is “cruelty.” Those are rather obvious. The near enemy of “love” is “attachment.” Attachment masquerades as love but is really self-serving. It is about what we want, not what someone else needs. The near enemy of “compassion” is “pity.”

And the near enemy of “equanimity” is “indifference.” Equanimity is not indifferent. It is more like “if you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs” [Kipling].

Thich Nhat Hanh tells this story. In an incident that has been somewhat lost to history, in 1976 and 1977 many refugees fled the tyranny of the political regime in Cambodia. They left in overloaded, flimsy, rotting boats, many of which sank, and many thousands of people died.

However, some boats survived, and afterward someone studied why certain boats made it and some did not. There was one common denominator, and that was if there was just one person on a boat who did not panic, that boat had a very high chance of success.

This is equanimity in the purest sense, supported by courage, love, and compassion.

Summary

One of the traditional mettā practices is described here. However, the most important point about the brahma vihāras is to recognize them as qualities to develop. And you will find that as your concentration and tranquility develop, the brahma vihāras will begin to manifest on their own. A mind that is at peace with itself will naturally incline toward altruism. The calm, happy, tranquil mind has no need for greed, hatred, and jealousy.

Additional Aids in Meditation

Walking Meditation

...it was the Buddha himself who first taught walking meditation. In the Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha taught walking meditation two times. In the section called "Postures," he said that a monk knows "I am walking" when he is walking, knows "I am standing" when he is standing, knows "I am sitting" when he is sitting, and knows "I am lying down" when he is lying down. In another section called "Clear Comprehension," the Buddha said, "A monk applies clear comprehension in going forward and in going back." Clear comprehension means the correct understanding of what one observes. To correctly understand what is observed, a yogi must gain concentration, and in order to gain concentration, he must apply mindfulness. Therefore, when the Buddha said, "Monks, apply clear comprehension," we must understand that not only clear comprehension must be applied, but also mindfulness and concentration. Thus the Buddha was instructing meditators to apply mindfulness, concentration, and clear comprehension while walking, while "going forward and back." Walking meditation is thus an important part of this process.

- [Sayadaw U Silananda, "[The Benefits of Walking Meditation](#)"]

I have gotten a lot of instruction over the years on walking meditation. However, the best instruction I got was not at a meditation retreat; it was

in a Tai Chi class.

Walking meditation has some of the same aims as sitting meditation, mainly a) keeping your attention in the present moment and b) maintaining a broad-based sense of awareness. As you might suspect, it is a body practice.

Sometimes the walking meditation instructions are to keep your attention very narrowly focused, like in the soles of the feet. But this is not what we are looking for, and it is certainly very hard to go through the day in normal activities trying to keep a narrow focus like that. You'll start walking into walls. One of the purposes of walking meditation is to bring the practice into daily life. So try to keep the same kind of broad-based attention that you are working on in the sitting meditation. The main difference is that the 80-20 rule will be 80% of your attention on walking and 20% on the breath. Your main focus of attention is the whole body.

The typical way to do walking meditation is to start by finding a place where you can take 20-30 steps. Walk from one end of that space to the other, then turn around and go back the other way. Your objective is to take those 20-30 steps without losing your attention on the walking and the breath.

In Tai Chi walking, when you take a step, you transfer all of your weight onto the foot, and then put your weight on that foot in such a way that the other leg can swing freely. You balance completely on one leg. You may even want to swing that leg back and forth a few times to make sure that you are properly balanced. Then you take the free leg and step out, still keeping all of your weight on the other leg. Likewise, to make sure that this is the case, you can bring the free leg back and forth a few times. Then you step forward and transfer all of your weight onto the other leg, making sure that you keep everything completely balanced. One way to think of it is to imagine that you are walking on a high wire.

Transferring your weight completely from one leg to the other helps keep your attention completely focused on the walking. That is why I prefer

Tai Chi walking as walking meditation.

Try to get your walking in sync with your breathing. You can play with this. Take one breath for each step or two breaths for each step. Or take two steps for each breath. There are no rules other than maintaining your attention. If you are feeling tired, you may want to walk as quickly as possible to generate some energy. If you are restless, you may also want to walk quickly to burn off some energy. Some people think that very slow walking is more “spiritual.” There are no bonus points for slow walking. Adjust your walking speed to match the needs of the mind and body.

There are several types of Tai Chi walking. You should feel free to explore them. There are some very good instructions on the Internet (Internet search: “[tai chi walking Marantz](#)”). But as a meditation exercise, the aim is to keep transferring your weight from one leg to the other and maintain your weight and balance on one leg at a time.

If you want to raise the stakes, a very interesting advanced exercise is to use the old “balance a book on your head” routine. This requires even more concentration. But it also can make it more fun, even a little silly.

Finally, you may find that this type of walking makes the muscles stiffen. This is another case where doing some stretching afterward is beneficial.

Guided Meditations

There are many guided meditations available on the Internet. Guided meditations are particularly helpful if you are having a hard time maintaining focus.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu has a plethora of short Dharma talks that he gives at the beginning of their evening, one-hour meditation sessions. They usually run from 10-15 minutes. I highly recommended them. You can find them at dhammatalks.org in the section labeled “talks→evening talks.”

One of the really wonderful Dharma teachers of the 20th century was Ayya Khema. She has many talks and guided meditations at the website dharmafeed.org. There are two sets of guided meditations on mettā called “[Loving Kindness Classic](#)” and “[Loving Kindness New Style](#).” I highly recommend all of her teachings.

There are many other guided meditations on the Internet, but be aware of whether they are consistent with these particular instructions. You may find yourself running into conflicts if they are not.

There are a number of chakra guided meditations (Internet search: “[chakra cleansing activating guided meditation](#)”) on YouTube. Just keep in mind that strictly speaking, chakra practice is Hindu, and Hinduism has some different beliefs from Buddhism (most notably “self” vs. “non-self”). Nonetheless, if you can tune out the theism and the self-ness, these can be helpful.

Finally, there are also guided concentration meditations (Internet search: “[concentration complete exercise](#)”), some of which use breath counting. Look for these as another supplement to what is here.

Gāthās

A “gāthā” is a poem. We have already seen this word in the book names *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*.

Gāthās have been used for many years to keep the mind focused. In some Zen traditions, there are gāthās for everything from getting up in the morning to brushing your teeth to eating to doing the dishes. There is a gāthā for almost everything (Internet search: “[thich nhat hanh gathas here and now](#)”).

As with the mettā phrases, you repeat them silently to yourself. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches this one for mindfulness meditation:

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.

*Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.
As my in-breath grows deep,
my out-breath grows slow.
Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out, I feel ease.
Breathing in, I smile.
Breathing out, I release.
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.*

You say the odd-numbered phrases on the in-breath and the even-numbered phrases on the out-breath.

(Thānissaro Bhikkhu notes that not every moment is wonderful. But I think the idea here is clear, and that is to use this as a way to help calm the mind.)

There are gāthās for getting out of bed, washing your hands, washing the dishes, and so on. Thich Nhat Hanh also teaches that when you do the dishes, do them as if you are washing the baby Buddha. It is a lovely thought.

It is not so much that you need to memorize every gāthā. The idea is to bring your undivided attention to every moment of the day. You use the breath to help in this way. And I think you will find that every time you find the breath, that it will have a calming effect on the mind. The day simply becomes less stressful.

Meditation in Daily Life

Apropos of the discussion on gāthās, this practice does not have much meaning if it is limited to the cushion. You should bring the practice into everything you do. You can use the 80-20 rule to bring the breath into almost any activity. Remember, the objective is not to put your attention fully on the breath. The objective is to use the breath to keep you fully in

the present moment. In this way you can bring more awareness to your thoughts, speech, and actions.

Summary

In this section, we added a number of techniques to our meditation toolbox. These include:

1. Walking meditation
2. Guided meditations
3. Gāthās
4. Using the breath during the day to bring mindfulness into every moment

Chanting

There is a saying in Tibet that a beautiful voice can make a wild animal stop dead in its tracks and listen.

- [Mary Talbot, "[Yungchen Llamo: Melodies from the Meditative State](#)", Tricycle Magazine, Spring 1997]

Chanting has been a part of Buddhist practice since the time of the Buddha. Because it was an oral tradition, the monks and nuns memorized the Buddha's discourses. The discourses were often composed in verse form. This lent them particularly well to chanting. The traditional language for chanting in the southern tradition of Buddhism is Pāli. Pāli has a unique rhythmic quality to it, something akin to Italian in the West.

Chanting is not as common in Western Buddhism as it is in the East. Some of that is cultural. Westerners do not seem comfortable with chanting. I went to a retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh once where after a few days some people started grouching about how they were being "forced to chant." His response was, "To chant or not to chant; that is not a question."

If chanting really makes you uncomfortable, then don't do it. But remember that we are doing this practice as a way of pushing up against our boundaries. Chanting won't hurt you, really, and it may help. So when you feel ready to revisit this practice, please do.

There are some good reasons to include chanting in your daily practice. The first of these is that chanting can help to quiet the mind and bring you into the present moment. When you first sit down, you may have many things on your mind. Getting the mind to settle down is probably difficult. Chanting can help you let go of those worldly distractions, remind you what you are doing and why, and bring your mind fully into the meditation.

Another important reason is that chanting embeds the teachings in your mind. If you memorize a chant, then when you are out during the day, there will be moments when the words of the chant will come to mind. The chant may help you to act in a more skillful way. This is why the monks and nuns chant the *Pātimokkha* (the monastic code) on the full moon and new moon days. Chanting helps commit the teachings to memory and to put them front and center into our consciousness.

Finally, chanting connects us to a long and honored tradition. Since the day the Buddha first taught the Four Noble Truths, Buddhists have chanted the discourses. When I was in India, I heard hundreds of Sri Lankan pilgrims chant the “Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: The Four Noble Truths” [SN 56.11] at the Mulagandhakuti Vihāra in Sarnath. They had it memorized. It was a transcendent experience. In moments like that we were all connected as part of this great tradition.

There are many chants. You should choose ones that you like. There is no right or wrong list of chants to do. The ones that I picked out here are ones that I enjoy and they facilitate the practice. These chants are well-known in the Buddhist world, and they are part of the standard repertoire.

The easiest way to chant is to have a recording of the chant and its text. You can just chant in English if you like, but I enjoy the rhythm of the Pāli language. I also think it helps to connect you more deeply to the Buddhist tradition. As you will see in the recommended list of chants, some are in Pāli only, some are in Pāli and English, and some are just in English. If you are doing the Pāli only chants, make sure that you know the meaning of the words. Otherwise the chant will not be very helpful in your practice.

Pāli Pronunciation

Pāli is unique in that it is a spoken language with no native alphabet. You may know that Chinese is just the opposite; it is a language where there is a standard written form, but the words have different spoken forms.

As Buddhism moved from country to country, it used whatever the native alphabet was.

When Western scholars started studying Pāli, they had to solve the problem of a written alphabet. The solution is “Romanized Pāli.” The Pāli language has 41 characters in it. Because the Roman alphabet only has 26 letters, the other characters are represented using diacritical marks.

There are a number of differences between Indic languages and English. The first is that Indic languages are built more scientifically. They arrange letters in the alphabet by where in the mouth the sound occurs. For example, ḍ, ḷ, ṇ, and ṭ are “palatal consonants.” They are pronounced with the tongue touching the roof of the mouth. The characters d, l, n, and t are lingua-dental consonants. They are pronounced with the tongue touching the teeth.

(The letter ḍ is called “d dot under.”)

Second, Indic languages do not have a “th” sound as in the word “this.” What they do have is a sound with a character followed by an “h”. In that sound, there is a slight puff of air that follows the consonant. These are “aspirated consonants.” The letter “th” is a “t” sound followed by a puff of air.

Finally, in Indic languages, the default accent is on the third to last syllable. In the Pāli word “nimitta” (“sign”), the accent is on “ni.” However, in most Pāli words the default accent is over-ridden by the rules for vowel pronunciation. In the word “bhāvanā” (“meditation”) both “a’s” are long and have equal emphasis.

Here is how to pronounce the vowels:

“a” as in “but”

“i” as in “pin”

“u” as in “duke”

“ā” as in “father”

“ī” as in “keen”

“ū” as in “pool”

“e” as in “way”

“o” as in “home”

Here is how to pronounce the consonants:

“g” is pronounced as in “girl”

“c” as in “church”

“ñ” as in “canyon”

Here is how to pronounce the “cerebrals”:

“ṭ, ḍ, ṇ” are spoken with the tongue on the roof of the mouth. These are called “dentals”

“t, d, n, l” with the tongue on the upper teeth

“ṁ” is a nasal as in “sing”

Here is how to pronounce the “aspirates”:

“kh, gh, ch, jh, ṭh, ḍh, th, dh, ph bh” pronounced with a slight outward puff of breath, e.g., “th” as in “Thomas” (not as in “that”), “ph” as in “top hat” (not as in “phone”)

Double consonants are always enunciated separately, e.g., “dd” as in “mad dog,” “gg” as in “big gun”

An “o” and an “e” always carry a stress, otherwise the stress falls on a long vowel: “ā, ī, ū” - or on a double consonant, or on “ṁ”.

(Most of this information comes from the Introduction to the *Majjhima Nikāya* by Bhikkhu Bodhi.)

Homage to the Buddha

Traditionally, the first chant is “Homage to the Buddha.” This is repeated three times. Doing something three times in India and in Buddhist practice gives it a seal of authority. These first three chants are typically done in Pāli only. The translations are underneath the Pāli. There is also a link below to a recording of these first three chants. They are typically done together, although the first chant is often done separately at the beginning of any Dharma related activity like a Dharma talk.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa
(Homage to the blessed, noble and perfectly enlightened one.)

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa
(Homage to the blessed, noble and perfectly enlightened one.)

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa
(Homage to the blessed, noble and perfectly enlightened one.)

Going for Refuge

In the next one you go for refuge, a safe haven, in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. These are also done three times. This chant is also usually done in Pāli only.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
(To the Buddha, I go for refuge.)

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(To the Dhamma, I go for refuge.)

San̄ghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(To the Saṅgha, I go for refuge.)

Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(For the second time I take refuge in the Buddha.)

Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(For the second time I take refuge in the Dhamma.)

Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(For the second time I take refuge in the Saṅgha.)

Tatīyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(For the third time I take refuge in the Buddha.)

Tatīyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(For the third time I take refuge in the Dhamma.)

Tatīyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

(For the third time I take refuge in the Saṅgha.)

The Five Precepts

Then you take the five ethical and moral precepts. These are discussed in the next chapter. For now, you can see what they look like, even if you prefer not to chant them until you understand them. This chant is here in Pāli only, but it is also commonly done in both Pāli and English.

Pāṇatipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

(I undertake the precept to refrain from taking the life of any living creature.)

Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

(I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.)

*Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
(I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.)*

*Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
(I undertake the precept to refrain from false and harmful speech.)*

*Surāmeraya-majja-pamādatthānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
(I undertake the precept to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs, which lead to heedlessness.)*

There is a lovely recording of these three chants by Upāsikā Sobhanā at the Birken Forest Monastery in British Columbia, Canada. (Internet search: "[youtube homage refuge precepts](#)")

Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection

The next three chants are from the chant book of Abhayagiri Monastery (Internet search: "[abhayagiri chant book](#)"). The chant book also has up and down arrows that show whether the tone is high or low. Chanting is typically done with three tones: a mid-tone, a high tone, and a low one.

In the chapter on Establishing a Mental Posture, one of the steps is the "Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection." This is the "Upajjhatthana Sutta: Contemplations" [AN 5.57]. Here are two versions of the chant. One is for women and has the feminine word forms, and the second version has the masculine word forms. The words that are gender-specific are in bold.

This chant is in both Pāli and English. The lines in square brackets ([...])

are usually only chanted by the chant leader.

Chant for women:

*[Handa mayaṃ abhiṇha-paccavekkhaṇa-pāṭaṃ
bhaṇāmaṣe]*

*[Jarā-dhammomhi] jaraṃ **anatītā***

I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond aging.

*Byādhī-dhammomhi byādhiṃ **anatītā***

*I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond
sickness.*

*Maraṇa-dhammomhi Maraṇaṃ **anatītā***

I am of the nature to die, I have not gone beyond dying.

Sabbehi me piyehi manāpehi nānābhāvo vinābhāvo

*All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become
otherwise, will become separated from me.*

Kammassakāmi kammadāyādā kammayoni
kammabandhu kamma-**paṭisaranā**.

*Yaṃ kammaṃ karissāmi kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā tassa
dāyādā bhavissāmi*

*I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of
my kamma, related to my
kamma, abide supported by my kamma. Whatever
kamma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the
heir.*

Evaṃ amhehi abhiṇhaṃ paccavekkhitappaṃ

Thus we should frequently recollect.

Chant for men:

*[Handa mayaṃ abhiṅha-paccavekkhaṇa-pāṭaṃ
bhaṇāmaṣe]*

*[Jarā-dhammomhi] jaraṃ **anatīto***

I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond aging.

*Byādhī-dhammomhi byādhiṃ **anatīto***

*I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond
sickness.*

*Maraṇa-dhammomhi Maraṇaṃ **anatīto***

I am of the nature to die, I have not gone beyond dying.

Sabbehi me piyehi manāpehi nānābhāvo vinābhāvo

*All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become
otherwise, will become separated from me.*

Kammassakomhi kammādāyādo kammayoni

kammabandhu kamma-**paṭisarano**.

*Yaṃ kammaṃ karissāmi kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā tassa
dāyādo bhavissāmi*

*I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of
my kamma, related to my*

*kamma, abide supported by my kamma. Whatever
kamma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the
heir.*

Evaṃ amhehi abhiṅhaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ

Thus we should frequently recollect.

You can find audio for this chant by doing an Internet search on
“[abhayagiri five subjects chant](#).” Because monks are chanting, the audio

has the masculine forms.

The Mettā Sutta

The next one is the “Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta: The Buddha’s Words on Loving-kindness” [AN 11.15]. This one is very commonly done, even in groups that do not normally do chanting. It helps to firmly establish the quality of loving-kindness in the mind. This one is in English only.

*[This is what should be done]
By one who is skilled in goodness
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove,
Wishing, in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be,
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short, or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to be born,
May all beings be at ease.
Let none deceive another
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.*

*Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings,
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies
And downwards to the depths,
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense-desires,
Is not born again into this world.*

You can find audio for this chant by doing an Internet search on [“abhayagiri metta chant.”](#)

The Highest Blessings

The last chant is the “Maṅgala Sutta: Highest Blessings” [Khp 5]. In this sutta, notice how the Buddha starts with the blessings of worldly life and works his way up to final liberation, nirvāṇa.

*[Thus have I heard that the Blessed One]
Was staying at Sāvātthī,
Residing at the Jeta’s Grove
In Anāthapiṇḍika’s park.*

*Then in the dark of the night, a radiant deva
Illuminated all Jeta’s Grove.*

*She bowed down low before the Blessed One
Then standing to one side she said:*

*Devas are concerned for happiness
And ever long for peace.
The same is true for humankind.
What then are the highest blessings?"*

*Avoiding those of foolish ways,
Associating with the wise,
And honoring those worthy of honor.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Living in places of suitable kinds,
With the fruits of past good deeds
And guided by the rightful way.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Accomplished in learning and craftsman's skills,
With discipline, highly trained,
And speech that is true and pleasant to hear.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Providing for mother and father's support
And cherishing family,
And ways of work that harm no being,
These are the highest blessings.*

*Giving with Dhamma in the heart,
Offering help to relatives and kin,
And acting in ways that leave no blame.
These are the highest blessings.*

Steadfast in restraint, and shunning evil ways,

*Avoiding intoxicants that dull the mind,
And heedfulness in all things that arise.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Respectfulness and of humble ways,
Contentment and gratitude,
And hearing the Dhamma frequently taught.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Patience and willingness to accept one's faults,
Seeing venerated seekers of the truth,
And sharing often the words of Dhamma.
These are the highest blessings.*

*The Holy Life lived with ardent effort,
Seeing for oneself the Noble Truths,
And the realization of nibbāna.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Although involved in worldly ways,
Unshaken the mind remains
And beyond all sorrow, spotless, secure.
These are the highest blessings.*

*They who live by following this path
Know victory wherever they go,
And every place for them is safe.
These are the highest blessings.*

You can find audio for this chant by doing an Internet search on [“abhayagiri highest blessings chant.”](#)

Summary

In this chapter, we discussed the reasons why chanting is beneficial to

your practice:

1. Chanting helps to settle the mind.
2. Chanting helps embed the teachings into your mind.
3. Chanting helps you connect to the tradition and to practicing Buddhists around the world.

Next, we introduced six chants that are part of the standard repertoire. These are:

1. Homage to the Buddha.
2. Going for refuge.
3. The five precepts.
4. Five subjects for frequent recollection.
5. The discourse on loving-kindness.
6. The discourse on the highest blessings.

All six of these chants concatenated together are available on the Internet. (Search keywords: "[daily pali meditation chants](#)")

II. Right View

What the Buddha Taught

Before we discuss the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, it is worth examining how we know what he taught.

We have several sources for the Buddha's teachings that date to his time. There are two different versions of the Buddhist Canon in Chinese called the "Āgamas." There is a partial version of the Canon in Tibetan, and there are a few discourses preserved in Sanskrit. However, the version of the Canon that is the most complete and the only one that is translated into English is the Pāli Canon. Pāli is a language that is similar to Sanskrit. Sanskrit was the language of the educated and the elite in ancient India; Pāli is its simplified version, something akin to the relationship between Latin and Italian.

This is not to denigrate the Āgamas. The Chinese were wonderful scholars and wonderful translators. Some of those translations are sure to prove superior to the Pāli. However, at present we do not have translations of the Āgamas in English, so only those who know both Chinese and Pāli can make those comparisons.

The Pāli Canon is usually associated with the Theravāda ("doctrine of the elders") tradition. This is also commonly called the "southern tradition" of Buddhism. The southern tradition stands in contrast to the "eastern (Chinese) tradition." This is also called the "Mahāyāna," and it includes Zen Buddhism. There is also the "northern (mainly Tibetan) tradition." This is also called the "Vajrayāna" or "Tantric Buddhism." However, associating the Pāli Canon with the Theravāda would be a misunderstanding of how the different schools of Buddhism evolved and the role of the earliest canonical literature in later Buddhist developments.

Modern scholarship puts the death of the Buddha at about 400 BCE. Until about 150-100 BCE, there was only one canonical literature. Tradition holds that about six months after the Buddha died, the existing arahants (fully awakened beings) met and held the First Buddhist Council. This was to codify the discourses that the Buddha and his most senior disciples gave.

At around 150 B.C.E and thereafter, new discourses were composed. This continued for about 400-500 years. These would eventually make up the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism. Monks and nuns who believed that only the original discourses were the word of the Buddha would later become the Theravāda tradition. Those who believed that both sets of discourses were the word of the Buddha would later form the Mahāyāna tradition. However, in India in the first millennium, monks and nuns of both schools studied and lived together in the same monasteries. Thus, the distinction between the two was not sharply divided.



Figure: Entrance to Nalanda University, where 10,000 monks of both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools once studied

Tantric/northern Buddhism grew out of the Mahāyāna tradition. It

started about 1,000 years after the Buddha. It, too, brought with it the original discourses along with the newer Mahāyāna discourses. However, by the time Tantric Buddhism made it to Tibet, they only had a portion of the Canon. These discourses exist today as the *Kanjur* (*Translated Word of the Buddha*) and the *Tenjur* (*Translated Treatises*). [Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*].

The important point here is that all traditions and schools of Buddhism accepted the early canonical literature as part of the teachings. They saw the later developments as a further refinement of the Buddha's teachings, not a way to replace them.

The Pāli Text Society (PTS) first translated the Pāli Canon into English in the 19th century. These editions are still available, and in some cases they are still the only translations available. They sometimes contain quaint Victorian language that is a little hard to follow. They also, rather amusingly, leave out racier sections that would have offended Victorian sensibilities. More recently, we have the translations of Bhikkhu Bodhi, who translated the *Majjhima Nikāya* jointly with his mentor Bhikkhu Ñānamoli. He also translated the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Maurice Walsh translated the *Digha Nikāya*. We also have a partial translation of the Canon by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. The latter are available for free on the Internet as eBooks. Printed copies are available by request from Metta Forest Monastery. It is very useful to compare different translations.

The German monk Ajahn Anālayo is currently working on translating the Āgamas into English. The Āgamas are translations of Sanskrit originals. As Buddhism became more widespread in India, the discourses were translated into Sanskrit from Pāli, or perhaps the local dialect, "old Magadhi". As Buddhism moved into China, the Sanskrit versions were translated into Chinese. While Sanskrit and Pāli are closely related, it is still remarkable how similar the Chinese versions are to the Pāli ones. Very few Sanskrit originals exist. As the Muslims moved into India at the end of the first millennium, they were particularly harsh on the Buddhists. They destroyed the great Buddhist universities, temples, and

libraries, including Nalanda.

The Oral Tradition

Considering the time that has passed since the life of the Buddha and the great distances that the Buddhist Canon has traveled, it is remarkable how coherent the Pāli Canon is. The Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan versions of the discourses are remarkably similar. The most notable variations are in the sequences of events that are described in different versions of a discourse. Nonetheless, the meanings remain fundamentally the same.

Ajahn Anālayo notes that this is consistent with how human memory works. Buddhism is an oral tradition. These works were memorized, starting with when they were given by the Buddha and his disciples. Human memory tends to remember the sense of a thing but doesn't always get the details right. Getting things out of order is very common, and that is consistent with the types of discrepancies you see in the Pāli version of a discourse compared to its Chinese equivalent. For an example of comparing different versions of a discourse, see Ajahn Anālayo's book *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*.

Also note that in Buddhism it was the meaning of a discourse that was the most important thing, not its literal transmission. In Hinduism they are more concerned with the literal translation. Thus, in Hinduism priests begin to memorize the literature at an age no greater than 12. In Buddhism, memorization does not begin until a monk or nun can understand its meaning.

One thing that is hard for Westerners to grasp is how efficient the system of memorization is in India. I experienced this first hand when I was there. I was walking around Bodh Gaya with a 12-year-old boy who adopted me. He was from the village of Uruvela, where a girl named "Sujātā" is credited with nursing the Buddha back to health prior to his awakening. Her stupa is still there. I asked the boy if he knew the story of Sujātā, whereupon he recited the entire story verbatim. In typically Indian fashion, to know something is to have memorized it.

In the West, there is not much emphasis on the ability to memorize. However, this skill can quickly be developed. In his book *Jewish Meditation*, Aryeh Kaplan tells a story about being in rabbinical school when he and some friends decided to memorize portions of the *Talmud*:

...when I was in yeshivah, a few friends and I decided to have a contest to see who could memorize the most pages of the Talmud. For me, it was an interesting experience. The first page took considerable effort and time, perhaps several hours. As I continued, each page became progressively easier. Eventually, after ten pages or so, I found that I could memorize a page after three or four readings. By the time I had gone through some twenty pages, I could memorize a page with a single reading. What had originally been extremely difficult had become relatively easy. My friends reported the same experience.

- [Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*]

Further, in cultures with oral traditions, certain linguistic mechanisms are used to make it easier to memorize. The technical term for this is “oral-formulaic composition.” Stock phrases and meters express the same ideas in different contexts. Anyone who has read the Pāli Canon quickly gets used to this. This is not unique to India. Medieval Irish, Celts, and Anglo-Saxons spontaneously composed poetry in this way. In more modern times, Allen Ginsberg also composed poetry this way. Thus, in cultures with oral traditions, there is a “language technology” that facilitates both composition and memorization.

In Buddhism, there was a further development, and that was the role of the bhanaka (“reciters”). The Pāli Canon is quite large. The PTS edition is 55 volumes. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s English translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya* is over 1100 pages. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* is twice as long. So to make the preservation of the texts easier, some monks (mainly it was monks)

specialized in preserving one collection. These were called “bhanakas.” A monk who specialized in the *Digha Nikāya* was a “Dighabhanaka,” a monk who specialized in the *Majjhima Nikāya* was a “Majjhimbhanaka,” and so forth. Some monks were able to memorize the entire Canon. Reputedly there are four or five monks in the world today who have done so. However, this was very rare, and usually the collections were divided up for preservation.

In the West we tend to not trust oral transmission, but in India it is just the opposite. Because they memorize the texts in a group in rigorous settings and the testing standards are quite strict, they believe that this is the most accurate way to transmit texts. They believe that written transmission is too subject to transcription errors. So we have two cultures that developed very differently in this way.

Another test of the Buddhist Canon is its consistency. Most scholars agree that the teachings are so coherent and cogent that they can only be the work of a single, genius mind. There are many, many thousands of pages in the Pāli Canon. If you read the Canon, especially the four main volumes, I think you will see that the teachings are so consistent that the discrepancies stand out.

But more importantly is that when you turn the discourses of the Buddha into an ardent and diligent way of life, the truth of the Buddha’s teachings becomes clear. It is a system of great breadth and great depth. One of the problems with the Buddha’s teaching is that many people have tried to simplify them, or perhaps more properly, to over-simplify it. The Buddha himself, after attaining awakening, was dubious that anyone else would understand what he had discovered:

“I considered: ‘This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in worldliness, takes delight in worldliness, rejoices in worldliness. It is hard for such a generation to see this

truth, namely, specific conditionality, dependent origination. And it is hard to see this truth, namely, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna. If I were to teach the Dhamma, others would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troublesome for me.'” - [MN 26.19]

This path requires understanding. This is what we are about to study. It requires ethical and moral conduct, which we are also about to study. And it requires skill in meditation, in developing the mind.

Fortunately for us, the Buddha did decide to teach what he discovered, and he taught a method of training so that we can realize it for ourselves:

Then the Blessed One, having understood Brahmā's invitation, out of compassion for beings, surveyed the world with the eye of an awakened One. As he did so, he saw beings with little dust in their eyes and those with much, those with keen faculties and those with dull, those with good attributes and those with bad, those easy to teach and those hard, some of them seeing disgrace and danger in the other world. Just as in a pond of blue or red or white lotuses, some lotuses - born and growing in the water - might flourish while immersed in the water, without rising up from the water; some might stand at an even level with the water; while some might rise up from the water and stand without being smeared by the water - so too, surveying the world with the eye of an awakened One, the Blessed One saw beings with little dust in their eyes and those with much, those with keen faculties and those with dull, those with good attributes and those with bad, those easy to teach and those hard, some of them seeing disgrace and danger in the other world.

Having seen this, he [said to] Brahmā Sahampati in verse:

*“Open are the doors to the Deathless
to those with ears.
Let them show their conviction.
Perceiving trouble, O Brahmā,
I did not tell people the refined,
sublime Dhamma.”*

Then Brahmā Sahampati, thinking, “The Blessed One has given his consent to teach the Dhamma,” bowed down to the Blessed One and, circling him on the right, disappeared right there. - [SN 6.1]

The Organization of the Pāli Canon

In the original version of the Canon, there were two sets of texts. These were the Vinaya Pitaka and the Sutta Pitaka. “Pitaka” means “basket.” The Vinaya Pitaka is the monastic code, the rules of conduct for the monks and nuns. The Sutta Pitaka is the collection of discourses.

The word “sutta” is a Pāli word that means “discourse.” In Sanskrit, the word is “sutra.” Sanskrit and Pāli are Indo-European languages, and many words in Sanskrit and Pāli have similar sounding words in English. The word “sutra” is related to the English word “suture,” meaning “to stitch together.”

In the Pāli Canon, the suttas are divided into five “nikāyas,” or “collections.” The fifth book, the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, has either 15 or 18 smaller texts depending on the version of the Canon:

1. **Digha Nikāya** - the long discourses
2. **Majjhima Nikāya** - the middle length discourses
3. **Samyutta Nikāya** - the connected discourses

4. **Aṅuttara Nikāya** - the numerical discourses
5. **Khuddaka Nikāya** - the collection of little texts
 1. **Khuddakapatha** - “short passages”
 2. **Dhammapada** - collection of sayings of the Buddha
 3. **Udana** - “inspired utterances”
 4. **Itivuttaka** - “the Buddha’s sayings”
 5. **Sutta Nipāta** - literally “suttas falling down,” a collection of 71 short suttas
 6. **Vimanavatthu** - stories about the life and deeds of people who attained residence in a heavenly mansion, the “Vimana,” due to meritorious deeds.
 7. **Petavatthu** - narratives describing how the effects of bad acts can lead to an unhappy rebirth
 8. **Therāgathā** - verses of the elder monks
 9. **Therīgāthā** - verses of the elder nuns
 10. **Jataka** - stories of previous lives of the Buddha
 11. **Niddesa** - commentary on the Sutta Nipāta, ascribed to the Buddha’s chief disciple Sāriputta
 12. **Patisambhidamagga** - “the path of discrimination,” also ascribed to Sāriputta
 13. **Apadāna** - “biographical stories” of monks and nuns
 14. **Buddhavamsa** - a hagiographical text which describes the life of the Buddha and of the twenty-four previous Buddhas
 15. **Cariyāpiṭaka** - “proper conduct,” accounts of the Buddha’s former lives when he, as a bodhisattva, exhibited behaviors known as “perfections,” which are prerequisites to Buddhahood
 16. **Nettipakarana** - “the guide,” practice methods taught by the Buddha’s disciple Kaccana, included only in the Burmese Canon
 17. **Petakopadesa** - “pitaka disclosure,” also attributed to Kaccana and also only in the Burmese Canon
 18. **Milindapañha** - “Questions of Milinda,” a dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Menander I (Pāli: Milinda) of Bactria and the Buddhist sage Nāgasena. Burmese only

The Āgamas are organized differently.

Summary

In this section we examined the source material for the Buddha's teachings. In particular we noted:

1. That the Pāli Canon is currently the best source that we have in English.
2. That while the Pāli Canon is generally associated with the Theravāda tradition, it is common to all of them.
3. That the oral tradition comes from a culture that was rigorous in the way this was done. Because they developed techniques to make oral transmission reliable, they considered it superior to written transmission.
4. That the discourses of the Buddha not only stand the test of coherence and cogency, they pass the test of actual practice.

The Life of the Buddha

So far we have focused on meditation practices that help develop concentration and tranquility. The purpose of this is to train the wild mind and establish a sense of well-being. Hopefully that process has already begun for you.

However, this is like learning how to drive. You know how to drive, or you are in the process of learning. But learning how to drive does not tell you where to go or how to get there. That is the purpose of “right view” or “right understanding.” It is one of the foundations of the Buddha’s teaching. “Right view” is the road map. It shows you the final goal, what some milestones are, and gives you an idea of the different ways to get there. And as with any trip, the exact route you take and what that experience will be like is highly individual.

To be sure, the Introduction gives some preliminary idea of where we are headed. As the Buddha said, the best way to practice is a) for our own benefit and welfare now and in the future, and b) for the benefit and welfare of others now and in the future. But that is a little like saying “go north.” Now we want to be more specific.

And one way to understand this landscape is to look at the Buddha’s life and the journey that he took.

Sources

We don’t know exactly when the Buddha was born. There are different timelines that start from as early as 624 BCE to as late as 400 BCE. The most recent scholarship puts his birth at between 480 BCE and 460 BCE, but there is no consensus on those dates either. Just because it is a round number, I usually use 480 BCE as his birth year. Since we do know that he lived 80 years, that would put his death at 400 BCE.

You sometimes read that we know very little about the historical

Buddha, and I find that puzzling. We have many thousands of pages of his discourses, over 6,000 in the main four volumes alone, and many of them contain stories about his life. In the Majjhima Nikāya alone there are four suttas that give a personal account of the night of his awakening. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says, “These descriptions are among the earliest extended autobiographical accounts in human history.” [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Wings to Awakening*]

Of course, the purpose of the discourses is not to give a biography of the Buddha; it is to teach the Dharma. But over the centuries many people have rendered the story of the Buddha’s life from this vast literature, and there is a lot of material.

One of the most interesting biographies is relatively recent. It is *The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pāli Canon* by the English monk Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. It is one of the classics of Buddhist literature.

As the title suggests, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli took information mainly from the Pāli Canon. It is an amazing achievement, and even if you do not read it, it is worth glancing through to see just how much biographical material there is.

We probably know more about the Buddha than anyone else from that time period. And in the last 200 years or so there has been an extraordinary amount of archeology in India that has added to our knowledge of Buddhist India. One particularly fascinating read is *The Search for the Buddha* by Charles Allen. This is not a book about Buddhism. It is a book about how European “Orientalists” found some of the lost sites of the Buddha’s life. It describes how they deciphered ancient texts in the same way that the Rosetta Stone provided a gateway into ancient Egypt. We even have cremated remains of the Buddha’s body; so to say that we do not know much about the historical Buddha would be a gross misstatement.

India in the fifth Century BCE

In the fifth century BCE, Indian civilization was centered in the Ganges River Valley in northeastern India. But that is not where it all started. An earlier civilization grew up in northwestern India in the Indus River Valley. The word "Indus" is where India gets its name. A number of these early Indian cities, most notably "Harappa" and "Mohenjo Darro," were discovered in the early 20th century.



Figure: The Indus River Civilization

There are some interesting aspects to these early cities. There are no

palaces or large houses. This indicates an egalitarian society. There are no temples, which is especially interesting for a country that places such importance on religion. However, small, clay objects were found that appear to have pictures of meditators on them, so they may have practiced meditation.

Subsequently, Aryans came down from the north and either conquered or simply merged with Harappan culture. The Aryans brought a different culture. This included the Vedic religion and a class system called the "Varnas." The Varna class system divided all Aryans into three hereditary classes: the brahmins, whose duty it is to maintain the Vedic religious tradition, the kṣatriyas, who were the ruling and warrior class, and the vaiśyas, who were the agricultural and merchant class. Non-Aryans made up a fourth class, the sudras, or servants.

(The Buddha is sometimes criticized for not talking about untouchability. But untouchables did not exist in India until long after the Buddha died.)

Eventually, the brahmins would be the most powerful class, but during the Buddha's time the kṣatriyas yielded the most power. Although technically where the Buddha grew up did not follow the Varna class system, when he was in the Ganges valley the Buddha described himself as a kṣatriyan.

The merging of these two cultures has implications for the India of the Buddha's time. By his time, there were two different religious groups. Vedic religion, which was the precursor to Hinduism, centered on animal sacrifice and the complex rituals performed by the brahmin priests. Vedic religion believed in reincarnation and that the release from an endless cycle of rebirths could only be achieved through the skillful performance of these rituals.

In contrast to the brahmins were the "samaṇas," or "recluses." They did not accept the Vedic religion. They were usually celibate, they lived by begging for alms, and their status in Indian society was by virtue of renunciation and not membership in a Varna. They were religious

seekers who spent their lives in homelessness. They roamed around the countryside preaching their various doctrines and sometimes debating with each other. Many of them adopted ascetic practices, some of which were quite severe.

There were key threads that ran through the religious and philosophical thinking in ancient India. These included the concept of Dharma, the concept of karma, and the belief in reincarnation:

1. **Dharma** (Sanskrit, Pāli: Dhamma)
2. **Karma** (Sanskrit, Pāli: Kamma)
3. **Reincarnation** (usually called “rebirth” in Buddhism to distinguish it from the idea that some permanent entity is reborn)

While the word “Dharma” has come to be associated with Buddhism, in ancient India it was a more general term. The idea of Dharma had two aspects to it. The first aspect was an understanding of how things are, of the basic nature of life, or, as Douglas Adams put it, “life, the universe, and everything.”

The second aspect of Dharma is that given a certain understanding of how things are, there is a way to act and behave that is in harmony with that understanding. As Rupert Gethin put it:

The notion of Dharma in Indian thought thus has both a descriptive and a prescriptive aspect: it is the way things are and the way to act.

- [Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*]

This is different from the way we think in the West. We make a distinction between religion and philosophy. We also make a distinction between atheism and theism. More recently we make the distinction between what is religious and what is spiritual. But to an Indian, these are all Dharmas. They are a) what do you believe and b) how do act as a result of what you believe.

The different religious schools of ancient India all had different Dharmas, and this was one feature that distinguished one school from another.

The second common thread was that of karma. The fundamental idea of karma is that each individual has a certain amount of karma from this and previous lifetimes. Whether such a thing as karma exists and how you accumulated it was one of the things that differentiated the different schools of Indian thought.

The final thread in ancient Indian thought is the belief in reincarnation. The idea of reincarnation is that when you die, you are reborn into a certain realm depending on your karma. The different realms include the heavenly realms, the human realm, the animal realm, the ghost realm, and the hell realm. Of course, some schools did not believe in reincarnation, and some did not believe in karma, but all schools would have had to address those issues because they were so common in Indian thought.

The Buddha grew up in Sakya, which straddles the border between modern day India and Nepal. Sakya was just to the north of the Aryan kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha, which were the two Indian superpowers of the day. Sakya was an early Indian republic, and it paid tribute to Kosala. Elected chieftains ruled Sakya, and the Buddha's father, Suddhodana, was one of those chieftains. Certainly, his father was a wealthy, powerful, and influential person by the standards of the day. Tradition later held that the young Buddha-to-be was a prince who was born to a royal family, but this is not entirely accurate. In fact, the democratic, egalitarian ideals of the early Indian republics stood in contrast to the monarchies.

This was the world into which the future Buddha was born. It was against this backdrop of Indian society that a woman named Maya gave birth to a baby boy, naming him "Siddhārtha Gautama."

(I went to a retreat once where the teacher claimed that we do not know what the Buddha's birth name was. I have never been able to find any

evidence that this is true. While the name “Siddhārtha” is not used in the Pāli Canon, the early Buddhist commentaries use it.)

Homeleaving

While there is a great deal of interesting information about Siddhārtha’s birth and early life, our purpose here is to use the Buddha’s journey to awakening as a way to understand his Dharma, so I will leave that part of his life to another project. (See *The Little Book of the Life of the Buddha*.)

Siddhārtha’s birth mother Maya died shortly after his birth. He was raised by one of the most important women in Buddhist history, Pajapati. She is usually called “Mahapajapati.” “Maha” is an honorific term that means “great,” as in “maharaja.” She was Maya’s sister, and by all accounts she was a uniquely giving, loving, and altruistic person.

When he was 16, he married the beautiful princess Yasodharā, who also figures prominently in Buddhist history. But for reasons that are not clear, she did not become pregnant until he was 29 years old. There is some indication that Siddhārtha felt pressured into providing an heir and that he stubbornly resisted. But despite his privileged position, beautiful wife, and loving parents, he was listless:

“Bhikkhus, I was delicately nurtured, most delicately nurtured, extremely delicately nurtured. At my father’s residence lotus ponds were made just for my enjoyment: in one of them blue lotuses bloomed, in another red lotuses, and in a third white lotuses. I used no sandalwood unless it came from Kāsi and my headdress, jacket, lower garment, and upper garment were made of cloth from Kāsi. By day and by night a white canopy was held over me so that cold and heat, dust, grass, and dew would not settle on me.

“I had three mansions: one for the winter, one for the

summer, and one for the rainy season. I spent the four months of the rains in the rainy-season mansion, being entertained by musicians, none of whom were male, and I did not leave the mansion. While in other people's homes slaves, workers, and servants are given broken rice together with sour gruel for their meals, in my father's residence they were given choice hill rice, meat, and boiled rice.

"Amid such splendor and a delicate life, it occurred to me: 'An uninstructed worldling, though himself subject to old age, not exempt from old age, feels repelled, humiliated, and disgusted when he sees another who is old, overlooking his own situation. Now I too am subject to old age and am not exempt from old age. Such being the case, if I were to feel repelled, humiliated, and disgusted when seeing another who is old, that would not be proper for me.' When I reflected thus, my intoxication with youth was completely abandoned." - [AN 3.38]

H.W. Schumann, in his book *The Historical Buddha*, suggests that Siddhartha made a deal with his parents that if he provided an heir he would be allowed to leave and become a samaṇa. This would explain, suggests Schumann, why he left immediately after his son Rāhula was born, which is exactly what he did.

This part of the story causes quite a stir in the West, especially among women. The fact that Siddhartha left his wife and baby boy does not sit well with some people.

I don't know that I can put that angst completely to rest. However, as Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu points out, throughout history men left home to secure the family's fortune and future. Merchants would be away for years on trading missions. Even into the 19th century men went off on whaling voyages that could take years. Siddhartha was trying to secure

the family's future in a much more transcendent way, one that if successful, would show the way to freedom from the rounds of rebirth for everyone, including his family.

(And while I hate to give away the punch line, the Buddha's father, step-mother, wife, son, and many cousins all eventually became awakened. Some of my favorite discourses of the Buddha's and some of his most endearing are teachings that he gave to his little boy Rāhula, who was only seven years old at the time. So ultimately it was a pretty good thing to be related to the Buddha.)

Also, this was India, where even today the extended family raises the children. The Buddha's family was wealthy and powerful. It is not like Yasodharā was a destitute single mom.

Later stories said that Yasodharā was fiercely loyal to her husband. When she heard that he was leading the "holy life," she started wearing yellow robes and eating only one meal a day. The Buddha's parents freed her from her marriage vows, but she refused to marry anyone else.

Whatever the situation, I can only say that I am glad he did what he did.

He described his home-leaving in the *Majjhima Nikāya*:

"...while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness." - [MN 26.14]

The Noble Quest

In the first part of the Buddha's life, he examined his life of wealth, luxury, and power and ultimately considered it futile. No matter what his status in life, he would inevitably grow old, get sick, and die. He

wanted to see if there was something better, a higher form of happiness, a greater aspiration than simply self-indulgence.

He traveled down the Ganges River valley to Rajagaha, the center of the Magadha Empire. (The word “raja” means “king,” and “gaha” means “home of.”) He set off from there, and he found his first teacher, Āḷāra Kālāma. The Buddha was able to learn Āḷāra Kālāma’s teachings, and eventually, he was also able to realize them through “direct knowledge.” What Āḷāra Kālāma taught him was how to enter the “base of nothingness,” which is the third immaterial attainment of meditative absorption.

Let me explain what the “base of nothingness” means. In the first section of this guide, you learned several concentration and tranquility practices. According to the Buddha’s system of meditative development, after long and diligent practice this will eventually lead to the first meditative absorption, or jhāna. There are four jhānas. When you have mastered the first four jhānas, one course of practice is to go on to the “immaterial attainments.” There are either four or five immaterial attainments depending on the source. The third immaterial attainment is the “base of nothingness.” I will describe this practice in the section on Right concentration. But for now, it is only important to understand that although it was a substantial meditative accomplishment, what the Buddha learned from Āḷāra Kālāma did not lead to final awakening:

“Thus Āḷāra Kālāma, my teacher, placed me, his pupil, on an equal footing with himself and awarded me the highest honor. But it occurred to me: ‘This Dhamma does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna, but only to reappearance in the base of nothingness.’ Not being satisfied with that Dhamma, disappointed with it, I left.” - [MN 26.15]

That last sentence is quite understated. Attaining the base of nothingness is a considerable achievement. As is evident by his offer to co-teach his

Dharma with the Buddha, Āḷāra Kālāma was aware that he had a star pupil on his hands. Nonetheless, the Buddha decided that this was not what he was looking for, and he moved on.

His next teacher was Uddaka Rāmaputta. The process was very similar. Uddaka Rāmaputta was able to teach him the next immaterial attainment, the “base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception”:

“Thus Uddaka Rāmaputta, my companion in the holy life, placed me in the position of a teacher and accorded me the highest honor. But it occurred to me: ‘This Dhamma does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna, but only to reappearance in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.’ Not being satisfied with that Dhamma, disappointed with it, I left.” - [MN 26.16]

So the story repeated. The Buddha mastered the next highest attainment, and in so doing earned the respect of his teacher. Still, the Buddha was not satisfied.

Although it is not stated explicitly here, the states of jhāna and the immaterial states, while they are difficult to master and offer various levels of freedom and satisfaction, are still conditioned states. They have a profound effect on the mind. They lead to greater mindfulness, greater skill, greater virtue, and greater happiness. But ultimately they are still conditioned. The Buddha was looking for something unconditioned. One of the synonyms for “nirvāṇa” is “the unconditioned.”

Next, the Buddha took up ascetic practices. The idea behind ascetic practices is that by torturing the body you free yourself from the rounds of rebirth. Being who he was, the Buddha undertook them with uncommon diligence. He described in agonizing detail where this led him:

"I thought: 'Suppose I take very little food, a handful each time, whether of bean soup or lentil soup or vetch soup or pea soup.' So I took very little food, a handful each time, whether of bean soup or lentil soup or vetch soup or pea soup. While I did so, my body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating so little my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems. Because of eating so little my backside became like a camel's hoof. Because of eating so little the projections on my spine stood forth like corded beads. Because of eating so little my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn. Because of eating so little the gleam of my eyes sank far down in their sockets, looking like the gleam of water that has sunk far down in a deep well. Because of eating so little my scalp shriveled and withered as a green bitter gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun. Because of eating so little my belly skin adhered to my backbone; thus if I touched my belly skin I encountered my backbone and if I touched my backbone I encountered my belly skin. Because of eating so little, if I defecated or urinated, I fell over on my face there. Because of eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at its roots, fell from my body as I rubbed." - [MN 36.28]

At this point, he was almost dead. If he continued down this path much longer he was going to die. And while the Buddha was diligent to a fault, he was not stupid. He knew that he had gone as far as it was humanly possible to go with these practices, and they had not led to final liberation:

"I thought: 'Whatever recluses or brahmins in the past have experienced painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this.

And whatever recluses and brahmins in the future will experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. And whatever recluses and brahmins at present experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to enlightenment?" - [MN 36.30]

He was convinced that no one had ever practiced as diligently as he had, and it had gotten him nowhere. If there was a way to final liberation, it had to be a different path.

In Buddhism, thinking often gets a bad name. But the Buddha thought a lot. He did a lot of analysis, especially now, when he was turning away from any known spiritual path. He started looking for something entirely different, entirely new. At one point, he reasoned thus:

"Suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes. Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty, and I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of non-cruelty." - [MN 19.2]

The Buddha is bringing the process of scientific inquiry to the fundamental problem of the human condition. He is both the scientist and the subject. And despite his desperate physical condition, his thinking is coldly logical.

He then remembered a time of great peace and serenity from his childhood, and he reflected on it:

"I considered: 'I recall that when my father the Sakyan

was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could that be the path to enlightenment? Then, following on that memory, came the realization: 'That is indeed the path to enlightenment.'" - [MN 36.31]

This is an important moment in the Buddha's quest.

Buddhism is sometimes called "The Middle Way." That phrase is often used in inappropriate contexts. What it really means is seen here. The Buddha started life rich, famous, and powerful. He had everything that a worldly life had to offer, and he rejected that as being ultimately unsatisfying.

Next, he went to the other extreme. He almost killed himself:

"Now when people saw me, some said: 'The recluse Gotama is black.' Other people said: 'The recluse Gotama is not black, he is brown.' Other people said: 'The recluse Gotama is neither black nor brown, he is golden-skinned.' So much had the clear, bright color of my skin deteriorated through eating so little." - [MN 36.29]

But now he rejected both paths as being unsatisfactory. And thus was born "The Middle Way," the path that lies between self-indulgence and self-abuse. He later said:

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is

painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna.” - [SN 56.11]

The key phrase in his analysis is “pleasure born of seclusion.” The Buddha eventually taught about the dangers of sense pleasures. Sense pleasure is what makes us fat. It is why women are abused and why people drink too much. It leads to wars.

But here the Buddha distinguished between sense pleasures and the pleasures that come from meditation, from tranquility and serenity:

“I thought: ‘Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?’ I thought: ‘I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.’” - [MN 36.31]

The Buddha then nursed himself back to health because, as he said, “It is not easy to attain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated” [MN 36.33]. He left the secluded caves where he was living, walked down the mountain and crossed the Niranjana River, which is dry outside of the monsoon season. Here he continued his quest near the village of Uruvela, where he could get alms. Ultimately, he had his breakthrough.

The Buddha’s description of the night of his awakening is so poetic, that I think I will let him speak for himself:

“Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied

and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in the second jhāna... With the fading away as well of rapture... I entered upon and abided in the third jhāna... With the abandoning of pleasure and pain... I entered upon and abided in the fourth jhāna... But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births... Thus with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives.

“This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings... Thus with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate

and unfortunate, and I understood how beings pass on according to their actions.

“This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: ‘This is suffering’;... ‘This is the origin of suffering’;... ‘This is the cessation of suffering’;... ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’;... ‘These are the taints’;... ‘This is the origin of the taints’;... ‘This is the cessation of the taints’;... ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.’

“When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’

“This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did

not invade my mind and remain.” - [MN 36.34-44]

The “taints” (Pāli: Āsavas, Sanskrit: Āśrava) are (1) sense desire, (2) craving for existence, and (3) ignorance.

As we see, the Buddha started the night by attaining, in turn, the first, second, third, and fourth jhānas. These are states of deep concentration (meditative absorption). In the fourth jhāna, his “concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability.” He had a sharp instrument with which to gain insight.

You may recognize from the first section of the meditation guide that we are following precisely the Buddha’s path. We have not gotten to jhāna yet, but we are cultivating concentration and tranquility in the same way that the Buddha did.

What happened next is that the Buddha used this “mind thus purified” to examine his previous lives. This may be a little hard for you to handle at this point, and if it is, don’t worry about it. Don’t turn it into a problem. But it is worth describing his awakening in exactly the way the Buddha did. Rebirth is a fundamental part of the Buddha’s teaching. The whole of the Dharma hangs together in a uniquely coherent way. Many teachers teach only what they choose to believe based on their cultural conditioning. But this path is about transcending our habits and conditioning. If rebirth is a problem for you, put it on a back shelf in your mind for now. But also know that rebirth is a central part of the Buddha’s teaching.

This happened in the “first watch of the night.” In India they divided the night into three watches, and each watch was four hours long.

On the second watch of the night, the Buddha turned his attention to how beings are born and reborn “according to their actions.” This last phrase is the key. How we behave determines our future. This is one of the most fundamental wisdom teachings of the Buddha.

This is a complicated topic and one that we will cover in detail. However, for now, if you have led a very immoral life, don't panic. There is a famous monk from the Buddha's time who had been a serial killer. His name was Angulimala. He killed 999 people. And yet he attained a full awakening. He became a Buddhist saint of sorts.

Karma is not deterministic. It is about the decisions that we make here and now. This training is about cultivating skillfulness, and through skillfulness, we create a more wholesome life for ourselves now and in the future. This has the added value of being of great service to everyone around us. Those two things are tightly bound.

In the last watch of the night, the Buddha discovered the Four Noble Truths:

1. The noble truth of suffering.
2. The noble truth of the cause of suffering.
3. The noble truth of the cessation of suffering.
4. The noble truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering.

And with that we have some inkling of what the Buddha's path was, how he got there, and what he learned. However, so far this is just the tip of the iceberg. In the next section, we will go into more detail about the Four Noble Truths and what the Buddha discovered in that third watch of the night.

Summary

In this chapter we examined the life of the Buddha and how his life can be an archetype for our own spiritual journey.

The Buddha was born into a life of luxury, but when he examined that life he found it wanting. No matter how much wealth, beauty, power, and luxury he had, he would still be subject to aging, sickness, and death. So he left that life to see if he could find something better.

His first two teachers taught him the transcendent meditation

attainments of the base of nothingness and the base of neither perception nor non-perception. He was so adept at these practices that his teachers offered him a place as their co-teacher. But the Buddha was not satisfied that this was all there is.

He then undertook great physical austerities to “burn off” his karma, as a way to end the cycle of life and birth. After nearly dying, he gave up on this, too, as a path to liberation.

Finally, he remembered a time when he was a child under a rose apple tree when he entered the first jhāna, a state of meditative absorption. “Why should I be afraid of this pleasure born of seclusion,” he thought. “Could this be the path to awakening?”

He nursed himself back to health while cultivating these states of meditative absorption. This helped him develop a mind that was “thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability.” This mind enabled him to see into his previous lives, the law of karma, and finally the Four Noble Truths. He had attained an awakening. He had become the Buddha.



Figure: Rose-apple tree

The Four Noble Truths

As we just saw, the Buddha had his awakening, and he described that awakening in terms of the Four Noble Truths.

The Buddha spent the next seven weeks immersing himself in his awakening [Mv 1-7]. In the first of those weeks he came to an understanding of his most subtle and challenging teaching, that on causation. It was also during this time that Brahmā convinced the Buddha to teach his Dharma.

The Buddha then set off to find his former companions. They were *samaṇas* who were doing the same ascetic practices that he had been doing. He gave his first sermon, the “Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma” [SN 56.11], to them. In this discourse he taught the Four Noble Truths.

The Buddha gave his first sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath, India. Ever since then deer have had a special meaning in Buddhism. You often see two reclining deer at the top of the entrances to Buddhist monasteries.



Figure: Deer and the Wheel of the Dharma

The great Buddhist King Asoka later built the “Dhamekh Stupa” to commemorate this event. The word “stupa” literally means “heap.” It is a mound or structure that contains relics. The Dhamekh Stupa was later enlarged in around 500 CE. You can visit it today. It is one of the places that the Buddha recommended that devout pilgrims visit during their lifetimes.



Figure: The Damekh Stupa

Nearby there is a Buddhist monastery, the Mulagandhakuti Vihāra. And every evening, monks and lay pilgrims chant the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. There is a very nice rendering of this sutta being chanted in Pāli on the Abhayagiri Monastery website. (Internet search: “[dhammacakkappavattana audio abhayagiri](#)”)



Figure: the Mulagandhakuti Vihāra



Figure: Statue outside the Mulagandhakuti Vihāra commemorating the Buddha's first discourse

The hand position of the Buddha in this photograph is the “teaching mudra.” The significance of the thumb touching the first finger is that he is teaching the First Noble Truth. You will see statues of the Buddha with this mudra but he will be touching a different finger. The number of the finger indicates which noble truth he is teaching: one, two, three, or four.

You may be wondering, well, if the sutta is about the Four Noble Truths, why is it called “The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma?”

For this discussion, we need to look at a bit of Indian lore. In ancient India there was the notion of a wheel-turning monarch. The wheel motif comes from the wheels of a chariot. A wheel-turning monarch (“chakravarti” in Sanskrit, “cakkavatti” in Pāli) is a “universal ruler,” one “whose chariot is rolling everywhere without obstruction.” This means that no one else’s army can keep him from going where he wants. But the most important attribute of a chakravarti is that he is just, moral, ethical, and benevolent. As long as the monarch is in power, the “wheel is turning.”

Buddhism adopted this symbolism. When a Buddha becomes awakened and then transmits the teachings to a disciple, he is said to have set the Wheel of the Dhamma/Dharma, the “Dhammacakka,” in motion. As long as the teachings are transmitted, the wheel continues to turn.

OK, so back to the Deer Park. The Buddha gave his teaching on the Four Noble Truths. One of the ascetics was a samaṇa named Kondañña. And as the Buddha finished his discourse, this happened:

*Gratified, the group of five monks delighted at his words.
And while this explanation was being given, there arose
to Ven. Kondañña the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye:
Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to
cessation. - [SN 56.11]*

That last line is the important one. What Kondañña did was extrapolate from the Four Noble Truths another of the Buddha’s wisdom teachings,

and that is the teaching on causality. The Buddha had not yet given this teaching, but Kondañña saw into the truth of awakening, and he became awakened. He was now an arahant, and the Wheel of the Dharma was set in motion. The Dharma had been transmitted. And from that point on Kondañña was known as “Añña Kondañña,” which means “Kondañña knows.”

The First Noble Truth

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.” - [SN 56.11]

The Pāli word that is translated here as “suffering” is “dukkha.” “Suffering” is the most common word used in English translations. Unfortunately, suffering does not capture the layers and flavors of the word dukkha. As a result, many people prefer to leave the word untranslated.

The Buddha himself never defined dukkha. Rather, as he did here, he gave lists of things that are dukkha. Some people say that the Buddha taught that life is suffering. He never said that. He simply provided us with an inventory of examples.

The word “dukkha” is translated variously as “unsatisfactoriness,” “stress,” and “suffering.” “Suffering” is the most pointed word and the one with the hardest edge. But dukkha can also mean that in the midst of pleasant experience, there is a kind of unsatisfactoriness. All of our experience is conditioned, and when those conditions are no longer present, then the pleasant experience is not there, either. This is the nature of our conditioned existence. It is inconstant and unreliable. And as the Buddha said here, when we have something we don’t want, we suffer, and when we don’t have what we want we suffer, and this is how

we spend a great deal of our lives.

The Second Noble Truth

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.” - [SN 56.11]

Our normal way of living is to seek pleasure. We crave. We become bandied about by our addictions, large and small.

The other side of craving is aversion. With unpleasant experience we don't want it, so we push it away. The effect of this is that in addition to the unpleasantness of the experience, we increase the unpleasant experience by adding our reaction to it. You have probably seen people who are relatively even-keeled when things go badly. They just never seem to get that upset. And then there are people who over-react to even the smallest problem.

We spend most of our existence going back and forth between craving and aversion, and if nothing else it's exhausting. This is why translating “dukkha” as “stress” is so fitting. Stress correctly identifies the direct experience of dukkha. We are constantly getting pushed and pulled by craving and aversion, and sometimes we are just confused. This confusion is also dukkha.

The Buddha defined three types of craving. The first is the obvious one, and that is craving for sense pleasure. He also defined craving for existence and craving for non-existence. Craving for existence is common in most people. We don't want to die, and if we do die, we want to end up somewhere nice. Craving for non-existence is the desire for annihilation. This is what happens to people who are suicidal. These types of craving define our existential dilemma.

The Third Noble Truth

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it.” - [SN 56.11]

The Third Noble Truth is the Good News.

The Four Noble Truths are often compared to a medical treatment. The First Noble Truth is the diagnosis of our condition. The Second Noble Truth is the cause. The Third Noble Truth is the end of the disease. The Fourth Noble Truth is the course of treatment.

The Fourth Noble Truth

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.” - [SN 56.11]

This is the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the training that we must follow to free ourselves from dukkha.

There is both a linear and a non-linear aspect to the Noble Eightfold Path. We have actually begun our practice at the end, with right mindfulness and right concentration.

However, it took a certain amount of wisdom for you to become interested in meditation, and that is at the beginning. This is right view, which can also be called “wisdom,” and “right intention.” We want to do something good.

And as we progress on the path, at times we will focus mainly on one

aspect of the path or another. Right now we are focusing on right view. But each aspect of the path re-enforces every other aspect. Nonetheless, there is also a method to the order in which the Buddha presented the path.

Right view is the road map. If your practice is not grounded in a correct understanding of right view, then it is easy to get lost. This is the purpose of studying and understanding right view. It is easy to misunderstand meditative experiences. Look at what happened to the Buddha on his journey. His first two teachers thought they had found final liberation. They did not see the whole picture. This is why we are studying right view before we get too much further.

It is also worth mentioning what “right” means. A lot of people have trouble with that word. “Right” is not a value judgment as in “I’m right and you’re wrong.” This is how religions go to war with each other. We certainly don’t need any more of that.

Here is a way to understand the use of “right” in this context. When I was a teenager I really got into working on my car. It was the 1960’s, and there was a famous book about fixing Volkswagens called *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Manual of Step-by-Step Procedures for the Compleat Idiot*. I mean, this book is a classic. I can’t believe that it is still in print. Not only is it still in print it is a best seller. A legendary guy named John Muir wrote it. (He is descended from the famous naturalist.) John Muir brought more joy to more backyard mechanics than anyone else in history. Sadly, he died prematurely at the age of 59 of a brain tumor, but he left behind quite a legacy.

Once I had a bad CV (“constant velocity”) joint. If you don’t know what that is, don’t worry about it. Hardly anybody does. But it was a tough job: greasy, knuckle scrapping, hard work. The CV joint, as I recall, had five or six studs that had to be lined up on the axle, and while you were squeezed underneath your VW you had to get everything lined up just right to get the CV joint on.

That is the meaning of “right” in this situation. It fits properly. Everything lines up. There is a sense of balance. You are not too far to one extreme or the other.

Balance is a big issue in meditation. That is why we constantly evaluate the breath. Are we too sleepy? We need more energy. Are we too restless? We need to calm down. We need to hit the mark precisely, or the CV joint won't go on.

The Noble Eightfold Path is the heart of Buddhist practice. Someone once asked the Dalai Lama, “With all of the different schools of Buddhism in the U.S., how can they reconcile their differences?” The Dalai Lama said to concentrate on the Four Noble Truths because it is the one teaching that all the schools of Buddhism agree on.

Right View

“And what is right view? Knowledge with regard to suffering, knowledge with regard to the origination of suffering, knowledge with regard to the cessation of suffering, knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering. This is called right view.” - [DN 22]

The first two path factors are the wisdom division of the path.

There is a discourse in the *Majjhima Nikāya* called the “Sammaditthi Sutta: The Discourse on Right View” [MN 9]. It is the most exhaustive treatment of right view in the Canon. Curiously, this discourse was not given by the Buddha but by one of his chief disciples, Sāriputta.

Sāriputta was quite an extraordinary monk. In the discourse “Foremost” the Buddha said, “Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples with great wisdom is Sāriputta” [AN 1.189]. High praise indeed, from the Buddha himself.

Sāriputta had an extraordinary intellect. Intellectual brilliance is not necessary to become awakened, and for that I am extremely thankful. However, Sāriputta had that type of mind and temperament. Sāriputta gave many of the most exhaustive and detailed discourses in the Pāli Canon.

Sāriputta was from a tiny village in India. After he died, they buried his ashes in a large stupa there, and that stupa became the centerpiece for one of the largest Buddhist universities in India, “Nalanada Vihāra.” During the first millennium, there were 10,000 monks studying at Nalanda. Sāriputta’s little village became the Buddhist equivalent of Princeton, New Jersey.



Figure: Sāriputta's stupa at Nalanda

The discourse on right view, as noted, goes into considerable detail. But I think we can summarize the key points as these:

1. **The Four Noble Truths**, which is what we are discussing here.
2. **Virtue** (ethics/morality), also known as “the wholesome and the unwholesome.” This will be the next topic we discuss.

3. **Causality**, the Buddha's teachings on cause and effect, to wit, that we live in a universe of causes and conditions.
4. **Karma**, i.e., that we inherit the consequences of our actions.
5. **The Three Marks of Existence**, i.e., that all conditioned things are impermanent, do not have a permanent essence, and ultimately are unsatisfying. That the only thing that is unconditioned is nirvāṇa ("nibbāna" in Pāli).

These are the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, and we will discuss each one of them in turn.

Here is a little side story about the Buddha's teachings. Many years ago in my job as a software engineer, the first Macintosh computer came out, and I had to learn how to program it. Everything was so different from anything we had ever done before. That included the technical documentation. That Macintosh came with an early edition of the documentation called *Inside Macintosh*. Apple did not even have time to do a proper printing of it, so they printed what came to be fondly known as "the phonebook edition" of *Inside Macintosh*. It literally looked like the Manhattan phonebook.

Inside Macintosh was about 1000 pages long. At that time no one had ever seen technical documentation that long. It was quite overwhelming. And the inside joke among computer programmers was that to understand any one chapter, you had to understand all the rest.

The Buddha's teachings are a little like that. You have to work your way through them iteratively, visiting and revisiting each topic. They are like pieces of a puzzle. So you just have to work with each piece as best you can, and if you keep at it, eventually you will see how everything fits together.

Right Intention

"And what is right intention? Being intent on

renunciation, on freedom from ill-will, on harmlessness. This is called right intention.” - [SN 45.8]

The Buddha was incredibly adept at taking concepts and notions that were well-known in India at that time and turning them a few degrees to the left or right to give them a new, different, and deeper meaning. It is one of the fun aspects of studying the discourses, to see his nuanced use of language.

He applied one of those twists to the notion of karma. The word “karma” literally means “action.” You might be able to deduce from what you have already read that if you are skillful in your actions, you will have a wholesome result now or in the future. And there is that aspect to the Buddha’s teaching on karma.

But the Buddha put the emphasis on the intention behind the actions:

“It is intention, bhikkhus, that I call kamma. For having intended, one acts by body, speech, or mind.” - [AN 6.63]

Everything that we do has an intention behind it. The question is, “How skillful is that intention?” We have a lot of intentions that are there for all sorts of nefarious, unskillful reasons. But usually we act without awareness, without knowledge or skill, without even being consciously aware of what we are doing or why. We are controlled by impulse.

Larry Rosenberg says that our thoughts and emotions are like little Nazis controlling our actions. We give them such great power, and in doing so we give up any real control we have over our lives. We think that our thoughts are “ours,” but really our thoughts are more akin to the tail wagging the dog. As the saying goes, “Don’t believe everything you think.”

Usually, we act out of habit. Given the same situation we will react the same way nine times out of ten. It may even be ten out of ten. And every time that we react in the same way in the same circumstances, we

reinforce that habit. In other words, we make it worse ,and acting in a different, more thoughtful, and skillful way is less likely.

Part of what we are trying to cultivate is attention to what we are doing and why. What motivates us? Is it something wholesome like generosity, kindness, good will, compassion, love, and wisdom? Or is it something else, something that gets us into trouble and causes the poor people around us all kinds of mischief?

In the West we hear that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” And there is some truth to that. If you give a homeless alcoholic money, that is not very skillful. Their next stop is probably a liquor store. But there is a difference between good intentions and skillful intentions. If you give that homeless person a sandwich or some clothes, that is a skillful, “right” intention. Another skillful act is to give him or her your full attention. Acknowledge them as a human being. And if you can get him or her to ordain as a monk or nun, you have done something really noble. There are different kinds of homelessness. There is the crushing failure of the streets and the liberating freedom of the monastery.

Habits are not inherently a bad thing. Bad habits are. We are trying to cultivate good, skillful habits. Good habits are self-reinforcing. Good habits make us happier. Being generous makes us happy, being loving makes us happy, being wise makes us happy. We just are not normally tuned into that kind of happiness. So one of the things we are working on is to twist that dial so we get a clean, clear signal, a signal that brings us into harmony with the world around us.

Right Speech

“And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. This is called right speech.” - [SN 45.8]

The next three path factors are the virtue division of the path. It is the

practice of ethics and morality.

The word “morality” can conjure up a pretty negative response. When my son was in college, he took a class on ethics and morality. I was quite excited about that because of what I had learned from Buddhism about ethics.

Unfortunately, his teacher taught ethics and morality in a mind-numbingly depressing way. His view was that ethics and morality are something that we have to do, but that they are incredibly burdensome. They are a cross that we have to bear.

The Buddha’s teachings could not be more different. Think of a time in your life when you lied about something. How did that make you feel? Being deceitful does not bring you joy and happiness. Speaking abusively or talking behind someone’s back or gossiping does not make you feel very good, either. So the Buddha’s teaching on ethics is to be aware of the effects of our actions on the mind. And speaking in a way that is skillful and wise will make you infinitely happier and more at peace with yourself than speaking in a way that causes harm.

We probably cause more problems with speech than with anything else we do. Whoever made up that saying about “sticks and stones” was completely off the mark. Countries go to war because of unskillful speech. Marriages break up. Fights start. People can be terribly hurt by unskillful speech. I am pretty sure that someone has said something to you that has been extremely painful. I am also guessing that you have said something that hurt someone else. I know I have.

Of all the Buddha’s teachings on ethics and morality, I think the ones on speech are the hardest to master. We are so used to having words fly out of our mouths without any thought or care. Some years ago I was in a Zen sangha, and one week our teacher told us to pick one precept on which to work especially diligently. Everyone in the group but one chose speech, just because it is so challenging.

There are four different types of wrong speech in Buddhism:

1. **Being deceitful** - This does not just mean “not lying.” People can say something that is factually true but it can still be deceitful. It can also have no benefit and cause harm.
2. **Speaking harshly or abusively** - This type of speech is meant to hurt someone.
3. **Speaking in a way that “causes discord in the community”** - This would include spreading ill will, talking behind someone’s back, etc. Fox News is the poster child for this type of wrong speech.
4. **“Idle” speech** - This is gossip, talking without any positive purpose or intent.

This does not mean that you have to sugar coat everything you say. The Buddha was from the warrior class, and he was not shy about reprimanding misbehaving monks. The difference is that he did it without malice or ill will. He did it out of compassion, right intention. Being able to do that is a very tricky thing. It is useful to think about our speech as having some positive result now or in the future, not necessarily that it is pleasant.

Inevitably the question comes up about a situation like hiding Jews from Nazis and they ask, “Are there any Jews in the attic?”

The answer is that in time and with increased awareness you can learn how to respond in a skillful way that does not involve lying. You could say, “I have done nothing that would bring shame to this family.” You could say, “I am an honest and law-abiding citizen.” There are many things you could say that would not be lying. You speak in a way that is skillful, and compassionate, and kind. And always remember that the guiding principle is to avoid suffering.

To be sure, we will work on something like right speech, and we will be off the mark sometimes. Maybe it will be most of the time. But remember, that is why we call these “practices.” We work on them. These skills develop over time. When you start, it is like learning archery. You

don't even know how to hold the bow. Then you know how to hold the bow but you can't hit the target. Then you can hit the target but your shots are all over the place. Finally, with time and effort and practice you can hit the bulls-eye every time.

Right Action

“And how is one made pure in three ways by bodily action? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He does not take, in the manner of a thief, things in a village or a wilderness that belong to others and have not been given by them. Abandoning sensual misconduct, he abstains from sensual misconduct. He does not get sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man. This is how one is made pure in three ways by bodily action.” - [AN 10.176]

There are three types of wrong action listed here. The first is “the taking of life.”

The canonical definition of killing extends to living beings that have “breath and consciousness.” This includes people and all animal life, including insects, but not plant life. The Pāli word for “killing” also has the connotation of harming. Thus this first definition of wrong action is sometimes called “basic non-harming.”

As with the other ethical teachings of the Buddha, two things stand out. The first is that if you kill something or hurt it, what effect does it have on the mind? I had an uncle who was sent to work at a farm at the age of 14. His job was to kill chickens. That is what he did all day. He killed chickens. When my mother would tell this story it always made her cry. Here was this young boy who had to drop out of school so he could do this hideous job, and he hated it.

I have a friend who fought in the Viet Nam War. He once told me that the people who had the most bravado about being soldiers were not the ones who fought on the front lines. In fact, it is very common for combat soldiers to subsequently go into a medical field, something that heals and not harms. That is what he did.

Throughout history we have had various euphemisms for what we now call “post-traumatic stress disorder” (Internet search: “[george carlin shell shock](#)”). This is a stark reminder of what killing can do to our minds.

I do not hunt or fish so I cannot comment on what effect that has on the mind. If you do those things, I can only invite you to see what the mind does with that.

One of the things that happens as our mind develops concentration and tranquility is that acting virtuously becomes more reflexive. It becomes a good habit. In the beginning, we have to really think about what we are doing. But over time a calmer, more peaceful mind will naturally gravitate toward ethical action. Our fear and habits lose some of their control over us. Being kind and empathetic becomes more natural. You step around the ants and the spiders because in your heart you know that all living things want to live.

The second type of wrong action is stealing. Note the phrasing here: “abandoning the taking of what is not given.” For emphasis, it is also common to take some poetic license and use the phrase “do not take what is not freely given.” I think that accurately describes the essence.

There is an interesting side story about this wording. In the Buddha’s

home country of Sakya, this is how the law against stealing was phrased. It was civil law. There is a story in the Vinaya (the monastic code) about six Sakyan princes who were inspired to go forth and become disciples of the Buddha. They left Sakya with their barber Upāli. At a certain point in their journey, they removed their princely clothes and jewelry and gave them to Upāli with the expectation that he would take them back to Sakya with him.

However, Upāli reasoned “the Sakyans are a fierce people. They will think that I have murdered the youths, and they might kill me.” So Upāli, too, decided to go forth and ordain as a monk. But before he set off, he took the fine things and hanged them from a tree. Then he said, “Let him who finds it take it as a gift.” By saying this, anyone who took these things would not be guilty of stealing because he had “freely offered them.” It is a piece of Sakyan civil law captured in the story [Vin ii.182].

(The story has an even happier ending. Upāli became awakened and a highly revered monk, “foremost in knowledge of the Vinaya.”)

We find all kinds of ways of rationalizing taking things, everything from the office pens to a dollar we find on the streets. I think the wording of this type of wrong action makes it pretty clear what stealing is.

The third type of wrong action is sexual misconduct. The way Sharon Salzberg phrases this is to “abstain from using your sexual energy in a way that causes harm to yourself or someone else.” That, too, I think makes this pretty clear. An interesting case is prostitution. Sex with a prostitute may not cause harm to the customer, but it may be extremely demeaning to the prostitute. And even where sexual activity is not deceitful, like an open marriage, you have to carefully consider the potential harm. People do more crazy, violent, destructive things over sex than any other activity.

The first rule in the monastic code is this:

Should any bhikkhu - participating in the training and

livelihood of the bhikkhus, without having renounced the training, without having declared his weakness - engage in sexual intercourse, even with a female animal, he is defeated and no longer in affiliation.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monastic Code*, Chapter 4: Pārājika]

In the monastic code there is a lot of space devoted to the topic of sex. Given the above passage, you would think it is pretty clear what the rule about engaging in sex is (i.e., don't). But people find all kinds of ways of pushing the bounds. There are pages and pages in the Vinaya about what exactly constitutes sex. (Yeah, I know. I wouldn't think it's that hard, either.) Monks are not even allowed to be in the company of a woman unattended for fear of that being misinterpreted. Because our sexual energy is so powerful, this is an area where you have to tread particularly carefully.

Right Livelihood

“And what, bhikkhus, is wrong livelihood? Scheming, talking, hinting, belittling, pursuing gain with gain: this is wrong livelihood.” - [MN 117.29]

The rule of thumb here is whether or not your job is causing harm.

This can be a tricky issue. I have had jobs where I thought I was doing some good, but in retrospect, I probably was not. And conversely, there are jobs where I was quite concerned about the ethics involved, and we probably did a lot of good.

The Buddha does give us some pretty straightforward advice on what constitutes wrong livelihood:

“A lay follower should not engage in five types of

business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in human beings, business in meat, business in intoxicants, and business in poison.” - [AN 5.177]

Any kind of livelihood that breaks one of the other ethical principles is suspect as well.

Be wary of confusing right livelihood with political correctness. I went to a retreat once where I wrote down on the registration form that I was a software engineer. I was treated to a lengthy, public berating by a prominent meditation teacher about the evils of corporations. I never said a word. She read my occupation from a sheet of paper and off she went.

I was a psychology major in college, and I was originally trained as a community organizer. I worked for several years in social service organizations. I finally left that career under troubling circumstances that involved corrupt administrators and unethical behavior. I also dealt with widespread incompetence. I eventually came to believe that most social service organizations are ineffective, and most therapists do little to help their clients.

I spent most of my life as a software engineer working for a company in the field of medical informatics. The purpose of the company was to develop technology for improving medical care. Although obviously we had to make money to stay in business, the primary goal was not to make a profit. I used to jokingly refer to it as “a non-profit corporation.” While that company was ultimately not very successful, the people who worked there were very dedicated to what we were doing.

Being ineffective does not necessarily make you guilty of wrong livelihood, but be careful about making snap judgments based on a particular occupation. Even the Dalai Lama said once that if a psychotherapist cannot help a large majority of clients (I think he said “80%”), they should find another line of work. It is not enough to have a good sounding job.

Right Effort

“And what, bhikkhus, is right effort? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu generates desire for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. He generates desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states... He generates desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states... He generates desire for the maintenance of arisen wholesome states, for their nondecay, increase, expansion, and fulfillment by development; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. This is called right effort.” - [SN 45.8]

The last three path factors are the concentration division of the path.

The quote above gives one rendering of right effort. It is common to define meditation as something passive. The instruction is to “be with whatever arises.” But as you can probably see by now, we are trying to do something quite active. We are training the mind, making it more serene and calm, more skillful. Simply being with whatever arises does not accomplish what the Buddha entreated us to do. You can be with some pretty unskillful mind states.

Many years ago I started running for exercise. At that time the popular type of training was “long, slow distance,” or “LSD” training. The theory is that by running long, slow distances, you can train the body to run faster. However, after a couple of years of running long, slow distances, I found that what I had trained myself to do was, not surprisingly, run long, slow distances. I never got faster. You can do what you train yourself to do, and if all you train yourself to do is “be with whatever arises,” that is all you will ever be able to do.

Here the Buddha is pretty clear about what our aim is:

1. Make an effort, arouse energy, apply your mind, and strive for the “nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states.”
2. Make an effort, arouse energy, apply your mind, and strive for the “abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states.”
3. Make an effort, arouse energy, apply your mind, and strive for the “arising of unarisen wholesome states.”
4. Make an effort, arouse energy, apply your mind, and strive for the “maintenance of arisen wholesome states.”

- [SN 51.13]

These are the “Four Right Efforts,” “Four Right Exertions,” “Four Great Efforts,” “Four Right Endeavors,” or “Four Right Strivings.”

Right effort is also about balanced effort, the optimal application of energy. This is especially important in the West where we are so results oriented and achievement oriented. We can really get ourselves tied up in knots. This practice takes lots and lots of time and lots and lots of patience and lots and lots of persistence. On one hand, we have to do it or nothing will happen. On the other hand, if we push too hard, that has its own problems. We can burn out and quit.

The Buddha covered this problem in a lovely discourse to Soṇa, who was a monk. He used the analogy of a musical instrument whose strings are neither too loose nor too tight:

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Rājagaha on Mount Vulture Peak. Now on that occasion the Venerable Soṇa was dwelling at Rājagaha in the Cool Grove.

Then, while the Venerable Soṇa was alone in seclusion, the following course of thought arose in his mind: “I am one of the Blessed One’s most energetic disciples, yet my mind has not been liberated from the taints by non-clinging. Now there is wealth in my family, and it is

possible for me to enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds. Let me then give up the training and return to the lower life, so that I can enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds.”

Then, having known with his own mind the course of thought in the Venerable Soṇa’s mind, just as a strong man might extend his drawn-in arm or draw in his extended arm, the Blessed One disappeared on Mount Vulture Peak and appeared in the Cool Grove in the presence of the Venerable Soṇa. The Blessed One sat down on the seat prepared for him. The Venerable Soṇa paid homage to the Blessed One and sat down to one side. The Blessed One then said to him:

“Soṇa, when you were alone in seclusion, didn’t the following course of thought arise in your mind: ‘I am one of the Blessed One’s most energetic disciples, yet my mind has not been liberated from the taints by non-clinging . Now there is wealth in my family, and it is possible for me to enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds. Let me then give up the training and return to the lower life, so that I can enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds?’”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“Tell me, Soṇa, in the past, when you lived at home, weren’t you skilled at the lute?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“What do you think, Soṇa? When its strings were too tight, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?”

“No, Bhante.”

“When its strings were too loose, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?”

“No, Bhante.”

“But, Soṇa, when its strings were neither too tight nor too loose but adjusted to a balanced pitch, was your lute well tuned and easy to play?”

“Yes, Bhante.”

“So too, Soṇa, if energy is aroused too forcefully this leads to restlessness, and if energy is too lax this leads to laziness. Therefore, Soṇa, resolve on a balance of energy, achieve evenness of the spiritual faculties, and take up the object there.” - [AN 6.55]

When we are sleepy, we need more energy. When we are restless, we need more calm. The practice always comes back to balance.

Right Mindfulness

“And what is the faculty of mindfulness? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, highly meticulous, remembering and able to call to mind even things that were done and said long ago. He remains focused on the body in and of itself - ardent, alert, and mindful - putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves... the mind in and of itself... mental qualities in and of themselves - ardent, alert, and mindful - putting aside greed and distress with reference to the

world." - [SN 48.10]

There is probably more misunderstanding about the word "mindfulness" than any other in Buddhist practice.

The Pāli word for mindfulness is "sati." It literally means "to recollect" or "to remember." This has more meaning in India where to know something is to have memorized it. At the time of the Buddha and for hundreds of years afterward, "sati" meant a) learning the discourses, b) remembering what you learned through your own experience, most especially in your practice, and then c) bringing that to bear in the present moment. In the above quote, we see the phrase "remembering and able to call to mind even things that were done and said long ago."

However, the word "sati/mindfulness" has taken quite a beating in its Western imported form. The word "mindfulness" is usually taught as something resembling "attention." The word "mindfulness" is defined this way at Wikipedia:

[Incorrect rendering of "mindfulness"]

Mindfulness is the intentional, accepting and non-judgemental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment. - [Wikipedia]

Here is how Psychology Today defines it:

[Second incorrect rendering of "mindfulness"]

Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. - [Psychology Today]

You have probably seen definitions like this.

But the word "attention" in Pāli is not "sati" but "manasikāra." Further,

the Buddha did not prescribe simple attention. He taught “appropriate attention,” also called “wise attention.” In Pāli this is “yoniso manasikāra.” Thus, the attention is not “non-judgmental” or simply “open”:

“Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of the taints is for one who knows and sees, not for one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention. When one attends unwisely, unarisen taints arise and arisen taints increase. When one attends wisely, unarisen taints do not arise and arisen taints are abandoned.” - [MN 2.3]

In the same sutta he said:

“Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention.” - [MN 2.5]

Thus, there is wise attention and unwise attention. There is the attention of those skilled in the Dhamma and the attention of those who are not skilled in the Dhamma. There are things fit for attention and things unfit for attention. The type of wise attention that the Buddha prescribed has skill, meaning, and purpose. But however you look at it, “sati” or “mindfulness” is not “attention.”

A sniper has non-judgmental, open attention to the present moment while he is in the act of killing. But it is not mindful because he is not keeping in mind, remembering, or recollecting the teachings on non-harming, kindness, compassion, love, and wisdom.

(A friend of mine says that “sati” is *judgmental* attention.)

Despite the confusion, the rendering of “sati” as “mindfulness” is actually quite clever:

When, in the nineteenth century, T. W. Rhys Davids encountered the word sati while translating DN 22 into English, he tried to find an English term that would convey this meaning of memory applied to purposeful activity in the present. Concluding that English didn't have an adequate equivalent, he made up his own: mindfulness. This, of course, wasn't a total invention. In fact, Rhys Davids' choice was apparently inspired by the phrasing of the Anglican prayer to be ever mindful of the needs of others - i.e., to always keep their needs in mind. Rhys Davids simply turned the adjective into a noun. Although the term mindfulness has its origins in a Christian context, and although its meaning has ironically become so distorted over the past century, its original meaning serves so well in conveying the Buddhist sense of memory applied to the present that I will continue to use it to render sati for the remainder of this book.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *Right Mindfulness*]

The Buddha usually linked mindfulness with other qualities. For example, in the “Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness” [MN 10] he linked mindfulness with ardency and alertness:

“He abides contemplating mind as mind, ardent, alert, and mindful...” - [MN 10.3]

This formula repeats itself as a stock phrase in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

The Buddha's instructions, then, are to be (1) ardent, (2) alert, and (3) mindful, and to do so with wise attention:

All three of these qualities get their focus from what the Buddha called "yoniso manasikara," "appropriate attention." Notice: That's "appropriate attention," not "bare attention." The Buddha discovered that the way you attend to things is determined by what you see as important: the questions you bring to the practice, the problems you want the practice to solve. No act of attention is ever "bare." If there were no problems in life you could open yourself up choicelessly to whatever came along. But the fact is there is a big problem smack dab in the middle of everything you do: the suffering that comes from acting in ignorance. This is why the Buddha doesn't tell you to view each moment with a beginner's eyes. You've got to keep the issue of suffering and its end always in mind.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "[Mindfulness Defined](#)"]

From the standpoint of practice, the best way to understand "sati" is that it means to "keep something in mind." We start by keeping the breath in mind. But we do so on a foundation of right view, what we are learning here. That is very important, meditating with a firm foundation of right view. Otherwise, you could just follow the breath forever, and who knows where that might take you? Maybe, probably, nowhere. So in our current examination of the Four Noble Truths, we are starting to lay the groundwork for where the breath can take us.

As I mentioned in the chapter on Breath Meditation, there is an art and a craft to meditation. Suppose you are a craftsman, and you make fine furniture. You are building a beautiful dresser, with curved, sculpted legs, and wood inlay, and it is finished with a custom crafted oil stain. At any given moment you bring to bear all the knowledge and training that

you have. There is everything that you learned from teachers and mentors and peers. There is everything that you have read. There is everything that you learned on your own. You remember the skills that you perfected: the precise way to hold a carving blade, the amount of pressure to get the cut just right. You do all this focused in the present moment. That is “mindfulness.” It is not just being in the present moment; it is being in the present moment with wisdom and skill.

There are two well-known suttas devoted to mindfulness. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is one that I have mentioned several times. This sutta is quite important and will get its own chapter. The other one is the “Ānāpānasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing” [MN 118]. Likewise, it will get its own chapter.

Right Concentration

“And what, friends, is right concentration? Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and abides in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration. With the fading away as well of rapture, he abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna, on account of which noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’ With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters upon and abides in the fourth

jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity. This is called right concentration.” - [MN 141.31]

As you can see here, the Buddha defined right concentration as the four jhānas, the states of meditative absorption.

The subject of jhāna practice is covered in detail later along with instructions on how to enter these states. For now, I will just give a brief description.

There is some confusion about what jhāna is and just what mind states qualify as jhāna. In the Pāli Canon there are four jhānas. Each jhāna is distinguished by “jhāna factors”:

1. 1st jhāna - applied and sustained thought, rapture and pleasure
2. 2nd jhāna - self-confidence and singleness of mind, rapture and pleasure
3. 3rd jhāna - pleasure and equanimity
4. 4th jhāna - equanimity

In addition, the Canon describes five “arupas,” or “immaterial attainments.” These are also states of concentration:

1. The base of boundless space
2. The base of boundless consciousness
3. The base of nothingness
4. The base of neither perception nor non-perception.
5. The cessation of feelings and perceptions

The confusion comes from a later reformulation of what constitutes jhāna in the *Visuddhimagga*.

The *Visuddhimagga* was written by Buddhaghosa (literally “voice of the Buddha”) around 430 CE in Sri Lanka. It is the mainstream interpretation of southern (Theravāda) Buddhism. In the *Visuddhimagga*, the first four arupas become jhānas five through eight, and the fifth arupa dropped

out of the group altogether. Even later, the fifth arupa informally came to be called the “ninth jhāna.” Thus by later understanding, there are either eight or nine jhānas.

According to the Buddha, any of the first four jhānas can lead to an awakening. However, the most common path is to master the first four jhānas prior to awakening, just as the Buddha did.

It is not trivial to attain jhāna, but it is possible. It takes diligence, patience, and persistence. The attainment of jhāna is one of the things toward which we are working.

When you are practicing, you start with mindfulness. When mindfulness becomes strong, it leads to concentration. Eventually, they become mutually supporting. Strong mindfulness leads to greater concentration, and strong concentration leads to greater mindfulness. It is a positive feedback loop.

In the meantime, you are developing some wholesome qualities: calm, serenity, tranquility, and a sense of well-being. There is a process of self-nurturing. You are taking care of yourself, and you are creating a place of safety and healing for yourself.

As concentration and mindfulness reinforce each other you, are developing “samatha” and “vipassana,” serenity and insight.

“These two things - serenity and insight - occur in him yoked evenly together.”- [MN 149.10]

You may have heard the expression “dry insight.” The notion behind dry insight is that awakening can happen without jhāna. But the evidence in the Pāli Canon is overwhelmingly against that idea. The arguments for dry insight are, at best, a stretch, while the Buddha’s teachings show that jhāna is central to the practice leading to awakening.

In the *Vissudhimagga*, jhāna morphed into something impossibly difficult, literally attainable by only “one in a million.” If that were true, then

almost no one could become awakened. So my guess is that then they backtracked by saying, well, jhāna isn't really required to become awakened.

It is also worth noting what "insight" means. In a Buddhist context, insight refers to one of the supermundane teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination/co-arising (the Buddha's law of causality), karma (wholesome actions bring wholesome results), and the "three marks of conditioned existence."

These are the wisdom teachings of the Buddha.

However, this does not mean that meditation cannot lead to more mundane, everyday insights. These mundane insights can and do occur in meditation. But the real prize is insights that you get into the supermundane, to a final awakening, and freedom from suffering, anxiety, and stress.

Summary

In this section, we looked at the Buddha's most fundamental teaching, the Four Noble Truths. These are not simply static facts. There is an activity associated with each one:

1. The Noble Truth of Suffering is "to be understood." [AN 6.63]
2. The Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering is "to be abandoned."
"But whosoever overcomes in this world this shameful craving, which is difficult to suppress, finds his sorrows fall from him, as drops of water from a lotus leaf." [Dhp 336]
3. The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering "is to realized."
"And what, bhikkhus, is the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving."
[SN 22.104]
4. The Noble Truth of the Noble Eightfold Path "is to be developed."
"And what, bhikkhus, is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path? The wisdom, the faculty of

wisdom, the power of wisdom, the investigation-of-states awakening factor, the path factor of right view in one whose mind is noble, whose mind is taintless, who possesses the noble path and is developing the noble path.” [MN 117.8]

We looked at the heart of the Buddha’s training in how to become free from suffering:

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

Right mindfulness leads to right concentration, and they become mutually reinforcing. Further, as the Buddha told us, the first seven path factors act as a support for the eighth path factor, jhāna. But all the path factors must be developed in a balanced way and are mutually supportive.

(A few years ago someone wrote an article in which he said that the Four Noble Truths are neither noble nor true. I suppose we should be glad that he at least conceded that there are four of them. For a refutation of that assertion, I recommend Thānissaro Bhikkhu’s book *Noble & True*.)

Virtue, Ethics, and Morality

The English word “morality” and its derivatives suggest a sense of obligation and constraint quite foreign to the Buddhist conception of sila; this connotation probably enters from the theistic background to Western ethics. Buddhism, with its non-theistic framework, grounds its ethics, not on the notion of obedience, but on that of harmony. In fact, the commentaries explain the word sila by another word, samadhana, meaning “harmony” or “coordination.”

- [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, Chapter IV: Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood]

As noted in the Introduction, in the Buddha’s system of teaching virtue/ethics/morality come first. But we have a lot of cultural baggage associated with the term “morality,” so I have left this topic until now. The Four Noble Truths includes a partial discussion of virtue in the Noble Eightfold Path: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Now we will give it our full attention.

Generosity

“If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of miserliness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift. But because beings do not know, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they eat without having given. The stain of miserliness overcomes their minds.” - [Iti 1.26]

The foundation of the Buddha's teachings is generosity.

In Buddhist countries like Thailand, the first thing that children learn is the practice of generosity. Monks go on daily alms rounds and the children put food into the monks' bowls. This is the only food that the monks will get that day. They are not even allowed to store food. So the children are doing something very important. And because monks are so revered in those countries, the children get a great deal of happiness and joy from the act of giving.

Generosity is both the beginning and the end of the path. The cause of our dukkha is craving. Craving is something we want. Generosity is something we give. It is the perfect antidote for craving.

If you are ever feeling sad or depressed, a very good antidote is to do something for someone else. When we are depressed, it is like being in an emotional phone booth. We are self-absorbed; everything seems tight and constricted. But when you do something for someone else, it forces you outside of yourself. It is a way to open up the heart.

Joseph Goldstein says that we often think of things to do for other people, but we hardly ever follow through on them. So when you think of something generous to do, do it. Turn generosity into a good habit.

Unfortunately, generosity is something that we often feel that we have to do, not something we want to do. We must train ourselves to feel the joy that comes from generosity. When you do something generous, don't just skip over the joy and satisfaction. Open up to it.

In Pāli there are two closely related words about generosity. The most commonly heard one is "dana" (pronounced like the name "Donna"). "Dana" literally means "the act of giving." The other related word is "caga." "Caga" is a "heart bent on giving."

A common misunderstanding about generosity is that it is about giving money or things. Traditionally in Buddhism, the most generous act is sharing the teachings. This is the generosity provided by monks and

nuns. They don't have any material possessions, but what they give is the teachings and their effort in cultivating the path. This is important to remember when you are meditating. As the Buddha said, the best way to meditate is for yourself and others. When you are meditating, it is a gift of generosity. You are cultivating your mind so that you can cause less mischief and do more good.

One of the greatest ways that you can be generous is with your attention. When you are talking with someone, give him or her your full attention. Be aware of all the invisible people in the world like the person who bags your groceries or cleans your motel room. I am often amazed at how uncomfortable this makes some people feel. They are so used to being invisible that if you pay them common courtesy, they don't know how to respond. Be on a mission to give the gift of your full attention and respect to everyone.

There is also a wisdom aspect to generosity. As we learned in the Noble Eightfold Path, the most important aspect of karma is our intention. We want to give with a full and open heart. This is "caga." But we should also use some discernment. There are charities that are not very effective. They give exorbitant salaries to their managers. And you don't want to give money to people who will just misuse it like addicts or chronic gamblers.

There will be times when you do something with the best of intentions and then later realize it was unskillful. That is not a problem. When you did it, you did it with the wisest intentions that you could muster at the time. That is all we can do. But then learn from that. The Buddhist path is all about learning. We learn, and that is how we develop and progress. As Larry Rosenberg says, in Buddhism we learn our way out of suffering.

In Buddhist countries, the greatest form of giving for lay people is to the monks and nuns. This brings more merit. Of course, there are some quite mischievous monks, so that is no guarantee, either.

Another quality we are trying to cultivate is an internal motivation with an internal result. Of course, people like to be thanked for their gifts. But it is useful to learn to detach yourself from any result. I once read about a practice where when you do something generous, you make it a point not to tell anyone about it. It is amazing how difficult this can be. If we do something nice, we want people to know about it. But it is also a very good practice to keep it to yourself. Learn to make your own sense of satisfaction the reward. Try it and see what the results are.

Having said that, in Buddhist countries it is a tradition to recognize people for their gifts. Temples have the names of the benefactors carved on them. The 19th century engineer James Prinsep was able to decipher an ancient Indian script by recognizing that the writing on ancient temples was a donor list [Charles Allen, *The Search for the Buddha*]. It is perfectly proper and perfectly within the Buddhist tradition to be recognized for your generosity and to feel joy and happiness in that generosity.

These are all ways in which we learn skillful giving, and we cultivate the joy of generosity.

The Five Lay Precepts

When a layperson formally becomes a Buddhist, they do two things. First, they take refuge in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. The latter refers specifically to the monastic Saṅgha and the noble Saṅgha. The Three Jewels are a safe haven, like a good harbor that shields ships from a storm.

The other thing you do to become a Buddhist is to take the five precepts.

Buddhism is creedless. To formally become a Buddhist you do not have to agree to believe anything. (Although you won't get very far if you do not believe that your actions have results.) But you do have to agree to behave in a certain way. The word for this is "orthopraxy." An "orthodoxy" is a system of belief; an "orthopraxy" is a system of

behavior.

The principle behind the five precepts is that, as the Buddha said, wholesome actions lead to wholesome results, and unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results. The precepts give a more precise definition of what wholesome actions are.

There are two reasons why the precepts cause problems for Westerners. The first comes from our Judeo-Christian heritage. We are afraid that if we break a precept we are going to go to hell. That is a stark way to put it, but that cultural conditioning is usually lurking in the background.

When I was in India, the person who led the trip wanted everyone to take the precepts. There was one woman who really had trouble with that. She kept using the word “vow” when discussing the precepts. She came from a Catholic background where a vow is something that you cannot break under any circumstances. Once you break a vow you are defeated, and there is no way to undo the damage.

But that is not the spirit of the precepts. Thich Nhat Hanh uses the term “trainings” rather than “precepts.” That is a better way to describe the principle. Again, we are cultivating and developing our minds. The precepts give us a sense of direction. Thich Nhat Hanh compares the “trainings” to the North Star. When you follow the North Star, you don’t expect to get to the North Star. You expect to go north. The precepts are a way for us to head north.

So we start with the precepts as objectives. When we break one, we reflect on our actions and see if we can do better the next time. We contemplate how to do that. We come up with a strategy. We turn it into a problem-solving exercise.

The other problem Westerners tend to have is guilt about what they have done in the past. Misunderstandings about karma can feed that. But what has happened has happened. There is no point in feeling guilty about the past. In fact, guilt can keep us from moving forward. What matters are the choices we make now and in the future. We want to nurture our

mental development in a certain way, a way that is more skillful. We have decided to run a marathon, but we have never run more than a hundred feet. So we have some work to do. But if you spend all your time lamenting that you have never run in the past, it is a complete waste of time.

The First Precept: not killing

*Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
I undertake the training rule to abstain from killing.*

As discussed in the chapter on the Four Noble Truths, the canonical definition of killing extends to living beings that have “breath and consciousness.” This includes people and all animal life, including insects, but not plant life. The Pāli word for “killing” also implies more generally “harming.” Thus this first precept is also sometimes called “basic non-harming.”

The precepts are one of several formulations of virtue in the Buddha’s teachings. We have already seen one formulation. That is steps three, four, and five of the Noble Eightfold Path: right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

A second formulation is what we are discussing here, the Five Precepts.

Another formulation of virtue is in the teachings on the wholesome and the unwholesome. We will discuss this in a later chapter.

A still different formulation of the teachings on virtue comes from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Here the Buddha taught the precepts as a gift that we give to the world:

“There are, bhikkhus, these five gifts, great gifts, primal, of long standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated and never before adulterated, which are not being

adulterated and will not be adulterated, not repudiated by wise ascetics and brahmins. What five?

“Here, a noble disciple, having abandoned the destruction of life, abstains from the destruction of life. By abstaining from the destruction of life, the noble disciple gives to an immeasurable number of beings freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction. He himself in turn enjoys immeasurable freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction. This is the first gift, a great gift, primal, of long standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated and never before adulterated, which is not being adulterated and will not be adulterated, not repudiated by wise ascetics and brahmins.” - [AN 8.39]

This is another doorway to virtue. Now the practice of ethics, morality, and virtue is not a burden. It is not that we suffer terrible consequences if we don't “follow the rules.” It is a gift that we give to the world. By not killing we give the gift of life, we give “immeasurable beings freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction.” In turn, we enjoy “immeasurable freedom from fear, enmity, and affliction.” This is a gift that is “long standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated and never before adulterated”:

The Aṅguttara Nikāya mentions five great gifts which have been held in high esteem by noble-minded [people] from ancient times (A.iv,246). Their value was not doubted in ancient times, it is not doubted at present, nor will it be doubted in the future. The wise recluses and brahmins had the highest respect for them. These great givings comprise the meticulous observance of the Five Precepts. By doing so one gives fearlessness, love and benevolence to all beings. If one human being can give security and freedom from fear to others by his behavior,

that is the highest form of dana one can give, not only to mankind, but to all living beings.

- [Lily de Silva, "[Giving in the Pāli Canon](#)"]

We often feel helpless because of all the turmoil, pain, and suffering in the world. The precepts are a very personal way in which we can make a difference.

You may know this story. It is called "Starfish":

Once upon a time, there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach before he began his work.

One day, as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself at the thought of someone who would dance to the day, and so, he walked faster to catch up.

As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, and that what he was doing was not dancing at all. The young man was reaching down to the shore, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean.

He came closer still and called out "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?"

The young man paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean."

"I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" asked the somewhat startled wise man.

To this, the young man replied, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

Upon hearing this, the wise man commented, "But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!"

At this, the young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, "It made a difference for that one."

- [Loren Eiseley, *The Unexpected Universe*]

We meet life where it touches us. In those moments we make a difference, even if it is just in the simple act of fully acknowledging the person who is cleaning our motel room.

The question often comes up as to whether eating meat breaks the first precept. That is a difficult one, especially in our modern world where we are so disconnected from our food sources.

It may surprise you to know that in southern Buddhism, monks and nuns are not forbidden to eat meat. This was also true at the time of the Buddha. This requires a little context. Because monks and nuns eat alms food, they accept all that is given. It is an act of gratitude. Thus it has less to do with what one eats than accepting the generosity of the people who are giving you food. In some cases, the people who are feeding you have very little themselves, and it would be unkind to refuse what they give.

There is an extended set of monastic rules called the "dhutanga" ("ascetic practices") that monks and nuns may undertake, and these include adhering to a vegetarian diet. But refraining from eating meat is not in the standard monastic code.

Having said that, over time it has become a convention to only give

vegetarian food to monks and nuns. In eastern Buddhism (China, Japan, Korea, and Viet Nam), vegetarianism is the rule. Mahāyāna Buddhists take the Bodhisattva vows that forbid the eating of meat. In Tibet, where it is nearly impossible to grow anything, the eating of meat is the norm.

However, we live in an era where being a vegetarian is easy. There are so many options that do not include meat. Conversely, the raising and killing of animals creates a lot of suffering. It is extremely destructive to the environment, and vegetarian diets are usually healthier. So if you are not a vegetarian, you might consider making a difference to a starfish or two.

The Second Precept: not taking what is not freely offered

*Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what
is not given.*

As mentioned in the chapter on The Four Noble Truths, the phrasing of the precept on stealing comes from Sakyan civil law. It is usually phrased as shown above, although it is also common to say, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not freely given.” This makes it clear that you should avoid even subtle forms of coercion.

The monastic code devotes a lot of attention to subtle coercion. Monks and nuns are not allowed to ask for anything except water. This may seem a little extreme, but the Buddha was very sensitive to how religious people abuse their power and authority. He went to great lengths to keep the monastic Saṅgha “pure.” Thus, monks and nuns are not allowed to make their preferences known even in subtle ways.

This is an important point. Sadly, there is as much abuse in Buddhism as in any other religion. There are many instances of Buddhist leaders taking advantage of their students, materially and sexually. Some of the

most famous are Richard Baker, who was Shunryu Suzuki's heir at the San Francisco Zen Center, Chogyam Trungpa, who was a sexual predator, heavy drinker and smoker, and more recently Joshu Sasaki, who was "groping and sexually harassing female students for decades" according to the New York Times. Sasaki even tried to break up the marriage of one of his students and encouraged him to have an affair.

The writer Natalie Goldberg wrote a book called *The Great Failure: My Unexpected Path to Truth*. It is about discovering that her teacher, Dainin Katagiri, sexually abused his students for decades.

One of the purposes of the monastic code is to protect both the Saṅgha and the laity.

The goal of the Buddha's teachings is to reduce suffering, to do good when possible, and to do so with love, compassion, and wisdom. So this precept is very important. We are trying to be happy with what we have.

This precept is particularly impossible to keep. By our very existence, we take what is not freely offered. The land and the animals on which our lives depend do not freely offer what we take. So we take as little as possible. Everything that we use has a cost associated with it, and the less we take, the farther north we get.

The Third Precept: abstaining from sexual misconduct

*Kāmesumicchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.
I undertake the training rule to avoid sensual misconduct.*

(In Pāli the same word is used for "sensual" and "sexual.")

Anyone who is a true Dharma follower cannot rationalize the abuses of people like Richard Baker, Chogyam Trungpa, Joshu Sasaki, and Dainin Katagiri. The Buddha devoted a lot of attention to the dangers of sexual energy. It is not possible to call people like these followers of the

Buddha's teaching.

I have heard many rationalizations about sexual abuse by teachers. One person I knew rationalized sexual abuse by saying that the "precepts are empty." "Emptiness" is sometimes used as a way to excuse atrocious behavior. As we will see when we discuss non-self and emptiness, this is a complete misrepresentation of those teachings. Emptiness is not nihilism. The universe is a realm of causes and conditions. The law of karma is ethically based, and it is the quality of our intentions that determines the karmic results of our actions. Thus, to rationalize unethical behavior based on "emptiness" is something diametrically opposed to the Dharma.

When this precept is violated, a human being is violated. The potential damage is extremely high. I live in New Mexico where one in three women on Navajo Reservations have been raped or are victims of attempted rape. In the United States, a woman's chance of being raped is one in five. Think about that the next time that you walk down the street. Every fifth woman you see will be a rape victim.

And as we have just seen, being a practicing Buddhist is no guarantee of safety, even from your teacher.

While there are women who violate this precept, it is mainly men who do. This is where the precepts as a gift are particularly powerful. Using your sexual energy in a responsible and respectful way is a gift that men can give to women. It is the gift of safety. It is a way to be a son, a brother, and a father to women, and not a threat. If you are a heterosexual man, think of the women in your life as Dharma sisters, to be loved, cherished, and protected.

For women who use their sexual energy in a way that is ultimately demeaning like promiscuity or even prostitution, have respect for yourself. Show yourself the same love, compassion, and wisdom you have for your dearest friend.

The Fourth Precept: abstaining from false speech

Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech.

As we have discussed already, there are four different types of wrong speech:

“And what, bhikkhus, is wrong speech? False speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and gossip: this is wrong speech.” - [MN 117.19]

And right speech:

“And what, bhikkhus, is right speech... partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions? Abstinance from false speech, abstinance from malicious speech, abstinance from harsh speech, abstinance from gossip: this is right speech.” - [MN 117.19]

In the “Abhayarājakumāra Sutta: To Prince Abhaya” [MN 58] the Buddha gave a different and more detailed teaching on right speech.

“So too, prince, such speech as the Tathāgata knows to be untrue, incorrect, and unbeneficial, and which is also unwelcome and disagreeable to others: such speech the Tathāgata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathāgata knows to be true and correct but unbeneficial, and which is also unwelcome and disagreeable to others: such speech the Tathāgata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathāgata knows to be true, correct, and beneficial, but which is unwelcome and disagreeable to others: the Tathāgata knows the time to use such speech. Such

speech as the Tathāgata knows to be untrue, incorrect, and unbeneficial, but which is welcome and agreeable to others: such speech the Tathāgata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathāgata knows to be true and correct but unbeneficial, and which is welcome and agreeable to others: such speech the Tathāgata does not utter. Such speech as the Tathāgata knows to be true, correct, and beneficial, and which is welcome and agreeable to others: the Tathāgata knows the time to use such speech. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has compassion for beings.”
- [MN 58.8]

Here the Buddha used a different way to determine whether or not something is right speech.

The first criteria is, is it true and correct?

The second criteria is, is it beneficial?

The third criteria is, is it welcome and agreeable?

In order to be right speech, it must be true and correct. It must also be beneficial. However, if the first two criteria are true then the third criteria may or may not be true. Thus speech that is true and correct and beneficial can either be welcome and agreeable or not. It doesn't have to be easy to hear.

Conversely, if it is not beneficial, even if it is true and correct, and either welcome or not, there is no point in speaking. In other words, don't waste your breath.

Elsewhere, he gave a somewhat different formulation:

“Bhikkhus, there are these five courses of speech that others may use when they address you: their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh,

connected with good or with harm, spoken with a mind of loving-kindness or with inner hate.” - [MN 21.11]

Here he added two other factors. One is timeliness. Is this the right time to say something, even if it is true and beneficial? There is a saying in business management, “Praise in public; criticize in private.” That is a good rule. Or someone may be very angry or upset. This may not be the time to say certain things to them.

Then there is the matter of intention. This is the second path factor as well. Is the speech intended to hurt? Is it self-serving? These intentions are always unskillful.

You may see by now that one of the characteristics of the Buddha’s teaching is how practical it is. That doesn’t make it easy. Keeping all this in mind while speaking requires considerable training. Our habits when it comes to speech are deeply ingrained. On the other hand, this isn’t rocket science. We “keep in mind” what right speech is, and we examine the consequences of our actions. It is always a case of cause and effect. And that is how we learn our way into greater skill, greater happiness, and greater usefulness as human beings.

The Fifth Precept: refraining from the use of intoxicants

Surā meraya majja pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

I undertake the training rule to abstain from the use of intoxicants to the point of heedlessness.

The fifth precept causes a lot of consternation in the West, and different people deal with it in different ways.

There is nothing inherently wrong with using intoxicants. The problem is that they tend to lead to breaking one of the other precepts. As this

precept says, it is a problem of heedlessness. I never did anything under the influence of intoxicants that I was proud of. The converse is, sadly, true. I regret many things I did while intoxicated. So I think that is all pretty straightforward.

I once sat on a grand jury, and about 11 out of every 10 cases we heard involved alcohol or drugs.

The literal meaning of this precept is abstinence. A lot of people say to that, well, what is the harm in a single glass of wine? Thich Nhat Hanh says to that, well, if you skip the first glass, then you never get to the third one. That is the traditional, hard-line response. In Buddhist countries like Thailand, alcohol is not even available, although that is changing with Western tourism. There are also the inevitable loopholes.

However, in some of the Buddha's discourses, there are only the first four precepts, so this one was a later addition. (There is a rather amusing story about a drunken monk that led to this precept.) That does not make it any less important; it is just worth noting. And a somewhat different interpretation is that the fifth precept only applies to intoxication and not to simple consumption.

I cannot answer all of those questions for you. Clearly, if you choose to consume intoxicants, you must be careful about what you do. This applies particularly in our modern world where eMail and social media make it so easy to engage in wrong conduct. The simplest route is complete abstinence. But at least be wary of your actions if you have consumed an intoxicant.

Summary

The ground for virtuous behavior is generosity. This provides the basis for the five lay precepts:

1. Abstaining from killing.
2. Abstaining from taking what is not freely given.

3. Abstaining from sexual misconduct.
4. Abstaining from false speech.
5. Abstaining from the use of intoxicants.

Cultivating virtue is not just following some rules. It is about cultivating a wholesome state of mind. When the Dalai Lama is asked what his religion is he says, "My religion is kindness." Without kindness, compassion, patience, understanding, and wisdom, the rest of this practice is almost meaningless. If you only do one thing in this practice, cultivate virtue:

*The scent of virtue
Is unsurpassed
Even by sandalwood, rosebay,
Water lily, and jasmine.*
- [Dhp 55]

Karma

*Phenomena are preceded by the heart,
ruled by the heart,
with a corrupted heart,
then suffering follows you -
as the wheel of the cart,
the track of the ox
that pulls it.*

*Phenomena are preceded by the heart,
ruled by the heart,
made of the heart. If you speak or act
with a calm, bright heart,
then happiness follows you,
like a shadow that never leaves. - [Dhp 1-2]*

In the chapter on the Buddha's life, we discussed how the religious schools of the Buddha's time had different understandings of karma. The brahmins believed that you attained good karma by the correct performance of rituals. The Jains believe that karma consists of extremely fine and subtle matter that pollutes the soul, and it is through the practice of austerities that you free yourself from it. The Ājīvikas believed in unalterable destiny, or fate.

(The Jains still exist in India. The Ājīvikas went out of business in the early second millennium.)

The Buddha's teaching on karma is that virtuous actions lead to good karma, and immoral actions lead to bad karma. It is one of the fundamental principles of the Buddha's teachings that our actions have results. Our future is not determined by a deity or higher power, nor is our future random. It is like the law of gravity, a natural force of nature.

Karma as Intention

“Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and mind.” - [AN 6.63]

As noted, the word “karma” literally means “action.” However, the Buddha also said that it is the intention behind the action that determines the karmic result. So an unskillful action does not have a negative result if the intention was skillful (i.e., accidents happen). Conversely, a skillful action does not bring merit unless the intention was also skillful (i.e., accidents happen). The monastic code makes this clear:

The system of penalties the Buddha worked out for the rules is based on two principles. The first is that the training aims primarily at the development of the mind. Thus the factors of intention and perception often determine whether or not a particular action is an infringement of a rule. For instance, killing an animal accidentally is, in terms of the mind of the agent, very different from killing it purposefully, and does not count as an infringement of the rule against killing.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, “[Introduction to the Pātimokkha Rules](#)”

This does not mean that sloppy inattention gets you off the hook. What we are discussing is “skillful intention.” This includes a) an altruistic motivation, b) wisdom, and c) appropriate attention. The brahma vihāras cultivate the first of these three qualities. Right view coupled with reflection and discernment cultivates the second. Breath meditation cultivates the third.

We usually put our energy into “doing the right thing.” There is nothing wrong with that; it is a noble effort. But we can get tied up in knots trying to reason out the ethical response to a situation. The Buddha suggested

that we might be better served by working on our motivation.

Some years ago I was working in a very stressful environment, and I had an uncomfortable meeting with the head of my department. I had been thinking about skillful intention, and so during the meeting, I put my energy into thoughts of love and compassion. I took a leap of faith and tried to conjure up a wholesome state of mind, letting the results take care of themselves.

The result was powerful. The words that came out of my mouth were skillful, thoughtful, and intelligent. I respectfully acknowledged the other person while still standing my ground. What could have been an ugly scene had an optimal result. We aired our differences and no employees were injured.

So the first point to make about karma is that our actions have results. The second point is that the intention behind the action determines the result.

Karma as a Complex System

The third point about karma is that it is non-linear, and it is not deterministic. This is perhaps the most common misunderstanding about karma. When something goes wrong you will hear people say that it is due to their bad karma.

The results of our past actions are one factor in what happens in the present moment, but they are not the only one. What happens at any given time is the result of so many causes and conditions that the Buddha said that if you try to understand them all, you will go mad:

“The result of kamma is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration.” - [AN 4.77]

A few years ago when the tsunami struck Asia, I heard a prominent

Tibetan Lama say that the reason all those people died was because of their karma. This is a complete misunderstanding of why things happen. Earthquakes happen because tectonic plates move, not because everyone who lives near the fault line did something bad in a previous life.

Some people want the law of karma to be this way, to be deterministic and punitive, to be a doctrine of righteousness:

There are many people who would like the teaching of karma to be a theory of justice. People really would like the world to be a just place. Karma is one way of getting justice out of the world, because it guarantees that the sucker will get his due sooner or later. The idea here is that there is a wonderful correlation that every action has a karmic result, or every result has a karmic source. If someone has stolen from you or has done something terrible to you, [and] as a result you have become poor by the end of your life while the offender has become rich and dies rich, we would like to think that the offender will get his just punishment in the next life. That is the balance – the confirmation of justice is maintained by having a theory of multiple lifetimes in which everything works out eventually. But I don't think that the Buddhist idea of karma was meant to be a form of justice. It is not supposed to explain everything and why everything is happening the way it is.

- [Gil Fronsdal, "[Karma and Intention](#)"]

Good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people. Everyone has good and bad karma. An important factor is what karma manifests at a given time. This is why good people can have unhappy lives and bad people can have good lives. In the "Mahākammavibhanga Sutta: The Greater Exposition of Action" [MN

136] the Buddha said this about karma and rebirth:

“Ānanda, there are four kinds of persons to be found existing in the world. What four? Here some person kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sensual pleasures, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips; he is covetous, has a mind of ill will, and holds wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.

“But here some person kills living beings... and holds wrong view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.

“Here some person abstains from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from misconduct in sensual pleasures, from false speech, from malicious speech, from harsh speech, from gossip; he is not covetous, his mind is without ill will, and he holds right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.

“But here some person abstains from killing living beings... and he holds right view. On the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.” - [MN 136]

Part of the Buddhist tradition is that the state of mind at death is extremely important in determining our next rebirth. If the mind is at ease when we die, the probability that good karma will manifest

increases. If the mind is agitated when we die, the probability that negative karma will manifest increases.

Traditionally, Buddhists strive diligently to die in peaceful circumstances. The consciousness is quite fragile at the time of death and for some time afterward, as people who have near-death experiences tell us. The usual time to wait for cremation is three days, although this varies by school. More importantly, the area around the body should be free from negative energy. There should be no crying, sadness, or hysteria. It is particularly auspicious to have a monk or nun preside over the death.

There is a famous story about Mahatma Gandhi and his death. Because of the political turmoil in India, Gandhi had a pretty good idea that he might be assassinated. But he was determined to die with love in his heart. He said, "If I am to die by the bullet of a madman, I must do so smiling. There must be no anger within me."

On January 30, 1948, Gandhi was fatally shot three times by a young man named "Nathuram Godse." Before he fell to the ground, Gandhi raised his hands to his face in the traditional Hindu greeting and bowed to Godse.

The Probabilistic Nature of Karma

So, you might ask, if what happens to us is the result of such complex conditions, why bother to cultivate virtue?

One reason is that while we cannot guarantee a wonderful future for ourselves, we can improve the odds. By cultivating generosity, kindness, love, compassion, wisdom, and virtue, you will not only be a happier, more contented person, the chances of having a happy future are greatly enhanced. You are playing the lottery with a lot of possible winning numbers.

The other reason is that even when we do something unskillful, the

negative effect is dampened. The negative energy is absorbed and dissipated. The Buddha used the analogy of a lump of salt to demonstrate this point:

“Here, bhikkhus, some person has created trifling bad kamma yet it leads him to hell, while some other person here has created exactly the same trifling kamma yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue].

“What kind of person creates trifling bad kamma that leads him to hell? Here, some person is undeveloped in body, virtuous behavior, mind, and wisdom; he is limited and has a mean character, and he dwells in suffering. When such a person creates trifling bad kamma, it leads him to hell.

“What kind of person creates exactly the same trifling bad kamma and yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue]? Here, some person is developed in body, virtuous behavior, mind, and wisdom. He is unlimited and has a lofty character, and he dwells without measure. When such a person creates exactly the same trifling bad kamma, it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue].

“Suppose a man would drop a lump of salt into a small bowl of water. What do you think, bhikkhus? Would that lump of salt make the small quantity of water in the bowl salty and undrinkable?”

“Yes, lord.”

“For what reason? Because the water in the bowl is limited, thus that lump of salt would make it salty and undrinkable.

“But suppose a man would drop a lump of salt into the river Ganges. What do you think, bhikkhus? Would that lump of salt make the river Ganges become salty and undrinkable?”

“No, Bhante.”

“For what reason? Because the river Ganges contains a large volume of water, thus that lump of salt would not make it salty and undrinkable.

“So too, bhikkhus, some person here has created trifling bad kamma yet it leads him to hell, while some other person here has created exactly the same trifling kamma yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue].” - [AN 3:100]

The greater our virtue, the greater our wisdom, and the greater our appropriate attention, the larger our “volume of water” is. The occasional indiscretion gets absorbed like a lump of salt in the Ganges.

There is a touching story in the Pāli Canon about the aforementioned King of Kosala, King Pasenadi, and his Queen Mallikā. Mallikā was a particularly virtuous, saintly person. And despite the usual ups and downs of a royal marriage, the King loved her dearly. But she had committed an act of sexual indiscretion and then compounded it by lying to the King about it. When she died this weighed on her mind, and as a result, she was reborn in one of the hell realms. However, because she was an otherwise virtuous person, she only spent seven days there. She was then reborn in “the Tusita heaven.”

While all this was happening, King Pasenadi, who was concerned about her welfare, asked the Buddha where she had been reborn. Out of compassion, the Buddha did not tell him. Also, King Pasenadi's faith in the Dharma was weak, so the Buddha did not want to discourage him. Thus, according to the story, the Buddha used his psychic powers to make King Pasenadi forget to ask the question.

After that seventh day, the Buddha went to King Pasenadi's palace for almsfood. The King finally remembered (!) to ask where the Queen was reborn. The Buddha told him that she was reborn in the Tusita heaven. The King was very pleased and said, "Where else could she be reborn? She was always thinking of doing good deeds. Venerable Sir! Now that she is gone, I, your humble disciple, hardly know what to do." In order to encourage the King in the Dharma, the Buddha told him:

*Even royal chariots rot,
the body too does rot, decay,
but undecaying's Dhamma of the Good
who to the good declare.*
- [Dhp 151]

(This story is not a discourse of the Buddha or one of his disciples. It comes from the *Dhammapada-atthakathā*, which is a commentary on the *Dhammapada*. The reference is iii, 119-123. But whether it is true or not it's still a good story. Internet search: "[buddhist women mallika](#)")

So the odds of a favorable result improve in two ways. One is that we simply have more good karma, so good karma is more likely to manifest. The other reason is that even when bad karma does manifest, our river of virtue absorbs it.

Choice

So far we have discussed past karma. But there is also present karma, the choices we make in the present moment.

Your state of mind influences the experience of the present moment. Someone cuts you off in traffic. That is simply an event. The next issue is what state of heart and mind do you bring to the experience? Are you tired and frustrated and angry? That will manifest in one way. Are you calm, and tranquil, and happy? That will manifest in another way.

We are cultivating a mind that is more skillful, more altruistic and wiser, calmer and more serene, and that affects what manifests in the present moment. Two people can have the same experience and have two different responses to that experience. And the same person can have a different response to the same set of conditions depending on their state of mind in the present moment.

This makes it possible to intervene in the present moment and modify the result. A skillful action with a skillful intention makes it possible to create a positive outcome even if negative karma is manifesting.

An extreme example of this is Angulimala, the serial killer who became an arahant. If unwholesome karma always manifested as an unwholesome result, if it was deterministic, it would not have been possible for Angulimala to become awakened. He would have had to suffer the consequences of his actions first [MN 86].

To be sure, Angulimala did not get off the hook entirely. People knew who he was and they used to throw things at him when he went on alms rounds. But being an arahant is a better outcome than being reborn in hell.

A trained mind exercises choice. It is an empowered mind. An untrained mind does not exercise choice. It acts on impulse. One of the things that we are doing by training the mind is we are asserting control over it. We are subduing the Nazis running around in our heads:

There was a period of time in my Buddhist practice where I became very good at... learning how to just be with things, and just let go of everything else. I would just let

go and let go and just be really present. That can be very peaceful, and life could be very peaceful, very content, and very happy just being present by letting go. That was quite fine when I was a monk since I did not have to make a lot of choices. Then I became a parent, and just letting go and being present was not going to be enough. Lying in bed at two o'clock in the morning when the kid has an earache, or the two kids are fighting. Just let go, let go - this is not enough. You have to make a choice about how to act. You have to be creative and think ahead. A lot of thought has to go into how to respond to this situation. You cannot just sit there and be present to this situation. Being present and letting go is very important, but there is more to it. Something is required of us.

So what do we do about that part of life when something is required of us? Buddha's teachings about karma have a lot to do with this aspect of our lives, the places where we have choice, and how we make choices. The practice of mindfulness brings us to that place where we see that we have a choice.

- [Gil Fronsdal, "[Karma and Intention](#)"]

You don't have to believe an abstract theory on karma and you do not have to believe in rebirth; you will see it work in this lifetime. A mind that is cultivating virtue is evolving toward greater joy, greater happiness, and less suffering. You may need a little faith in the process, but eventually you will reap the fruits of skillful intentions. You do not need to wait until some future life. You do not even have to believe that there will be a future life. A heart that is open, warm, kind, loving, wise, and at peace with itself is its own reward.

The End of Karma

You may have surmised by now that there are limits to what good karma can bring you. All unawakened beings have mixed karma, and bad karma can always manifest. And the physical forces of the universe play their part. There are always those pesky tectonic plates moving about. Conditioned existence is very risky and full of dangers.

The Buddha was after something better than simply improving the odds. And according to the Buddha's teaching, as beings are born and reborn into different realms, even skillful beings eventually fall into bad habits. They become proud. They become vain. They become pleased with themselves, and oops, there you go, sliding down the karmic chain. They inevitably end up in an unhappy place. This dance has been going on throughout limitless lifetimes.

On the night of his awakening, therefore, he kept looking. He did not just want to acquire good karma; he wanted it to end. He wanted to free himself from the uncertainties of conditioned existence.

This is a radical notion. Now, the path to ending karma runs through the process of first developing good karma. So don't think that everything that we are doing is for naught. This is a journey of a thousand miles. You can't skip steps. That is why there are books on meditation called *Breath by Breath* and *With Each and Every Breath*. It is one breath at a time. It is one moment at a time. And progress is not linear. It is steps forward and back and forward and back. Remember patience and persistence?

But out there over the horizon is this intriguing notion that we can stop creating karma altogether. We can free ourselves from the uncertainties of conditioned existence. We can guarantee our happiness, and we can end our suffering:

"Bhikkhus, there are these four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after I realized them for myself with direct knowledge. What four? There is dark kamma with

dark result; there is bright kamma with bright result ; there is dark-and-bright kamma with dark-and-bright result; and there is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, kamma that leads to the destruction of kamma. These are the four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after I realized them for myself with direct knowledge.” - [AN 4.232]

It is this fourth kind of karma, karma that leads to the destruction of karma, that the Buddha was seeking. This is the topic of the next chapter, the law of causation, “dependent co-arising,” and the chapter on “awakening.”

Summary

In this chapter we examined the law of karma:

1. The law of karma is a process of cause and effect, actions and their results.
2. The quality of our intentions determines the karmic result.
3. Karma is a complex system, non-linear, and not deterministic.
4. Karma works on probabilities. The more good karma we have, the more likely it is that we will have a favorable result. A developed, skillful mind absorbs and dissipates the effects of occasional unskillful actions.
5. We can affect the results of past karma by training our minds to make skillful choices in the present moment.
6. The ultimate goal is to end the creation of karma completely.

Dependent Co-arising

“Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu knows thus: ‘When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.’” - [MN 115.11]

The Buddha’s most complicated teaching is on causation (Pāli: paṭicca-samuppāda; Sanskrit: pratītya-samutpāda). “Paṭicca-samuppāda” is translated as “dependent origination,” “dependent co-origination,” “dependent arising,” or “dependent co-arising.”

In the Pāli Canon, the Buddha gave different formulations of the causation process. The simplest one is shown above. It is called “this-that” conditionality. It is reflective of his teaching on right effort:

“And what, bhikkhus, is right effort? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu generates desire for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. He generates desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states... He generates desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states... He generates desire for the maintenance of arisen wholesome states, for their nondecay, increase, expansion, and fulfillment by development; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. This is called right effort.” - [SN 45.8]

In “this-that conditionality” the Buddha expressed this same idea as follows:

1. Preventing the arising of the causes and conditions of unwholesome mind states (“When this does not exist, that does

- not come to be”)
2. Abandoning arisen unwholesome mind states (“...with the cessation of this, that ceases”)
 3. Cultivating the causes and conditions for wholesome mind states (“When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises”).

In the most detailed discourses on dependent co-arising the Buddha described twelve steps in the causal chain:

*With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be];
with volitional formations as condition, consciousness;
with consciousness as condition, name-and-form;
with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases;
with the six sense bases as condition, contact;
with contact as condition, feeling;
with feeling as condition, craving;
with craving as condition, clinging;
with clinging as condition, existence;
with existence as condition, birth;
with birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow,
lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is
the origin of this whole mass of suffering. - [MN 115.11]*

Other suttas give slightly different versions of the chain. In the “Mahāpadāna Sutta: The Great Discourse on the Lineage” [DN 14.2.18], there are ten links instead of twelve. The “Mahānidāna Sutta: The Great Discourse on Origination” [DN 15.2] also leaves out the six sense-bases for a total of nine links. However, the two versions that are most commonly taught are “this-that conditionality” and the “twelve links.”

Later Interpretations

In the centuries that followed the Buddha's death there were many different interpretations of the Buddha's teachings on causation. One of them is shown here where the links in the chain are a circle or wheel. In Indian philosophy a wheel symbolizes completeness, so the implication is that this teaching is whole and complete.

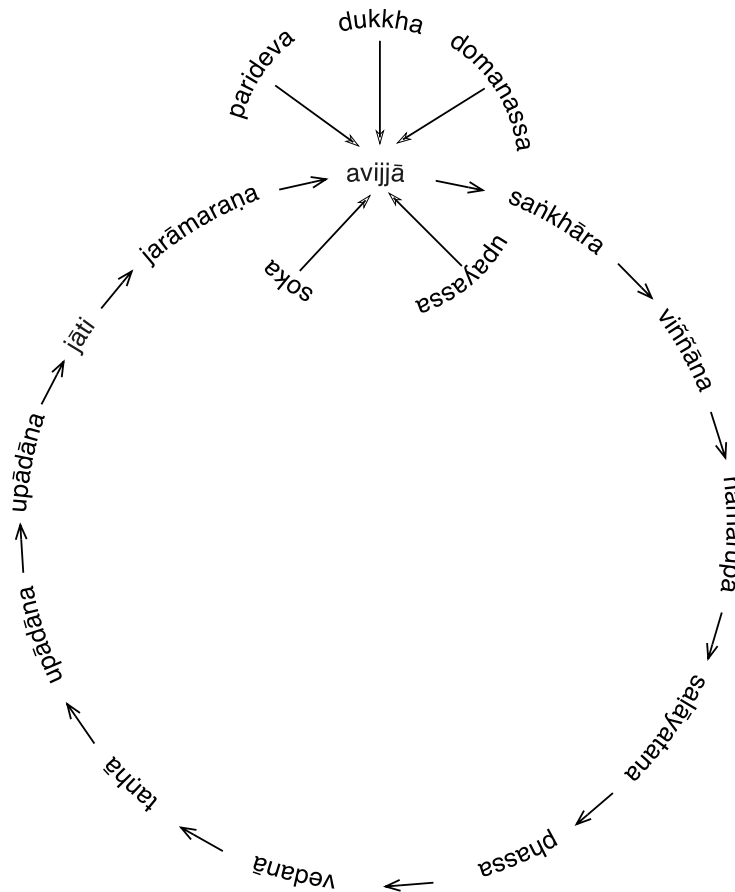


Figure: Traditional Theravāda Representation of the Chain of Dependent Co-arising

In another formulation, the 12 steps play out over three lifetimes:

One way to understand [the links] is sequentially, over a period of three lifetimes: the past life, the present life and the future life. In this case, ignorance and mental formation belong to the past life. They represent the conditions that are responsible for the occurrence of this

life. The following components of dependent origination - consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, clinging and becoming - belong to this life. In brief, these eight components constitute the process of evolution within this life. The last two components - birth and old age and death - belong to the future life. According to this scheme, we can see how the twelve components of dependent origination are distributed over the period of three lifetimes, and how the first two - ignorance and mental formation result in the emergence of this life with its psycho-physical personality and how in turn, the actions performed in this life result in rebirth in the future life. This is one popular and authoritative way of interpreting the twelve components of dependent origination. - [["Fundamentals of Buddhism: Dependent Origination"](#)]

However, both of these interpretations are largely discredited. I mention them because they still linger in the Buddhist world. 2,000 years creates a lot of inertia.

There is still no consensus about the meaning of dependent co-arising. Ajahn Punnadhammo says that when he was at the monastery in Thailand, the hottest debate topics were a) dependent co-arising and b) whether you can eat cheese after noon. (This is an in-joke. Monks are not allowed to eat solid food after noon, so the issue is whether cheese is a solid food.)

So dependent co-arising is like the joke about Israeli politics where you have two Jews and three opinions.

Even in the Buddha's time, this was not a trivial topic. In the following conversation, the Buddha cautioned his attendant Ānanda not to underestimate how difficult it is to fully comprehend:

Ven. Ānanda approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: “It’s amazing, lord, it’s astounding, how deep this dependent co-arising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be.”

[The Buddha:] “Don’t say that, Ānanda. Don’t say that. Deep is this dependent co-arising, and deep its appearance. It’s because of not understanding and not penetrating this Dhamma that this generation is like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, and bad destinations.” - [DN 15.1]

And in another sutta, Sāriputta quoted the Buddha as equating the understanding of dependent co-arising with awakening itself:

Now this has been said by the Blessed One: “One who sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising.” - [MN 28.28]

This is not to make it sound overly complicated. It is simply to make the points that a) there are different interpretations of dependent co-arising, and b) if you want to understand it, you are going to have to work at it. When the Buddha had the above conversation with Ānanda, he was a stream-enterer. He had attained the first stage of awakening. Ānanda had a brilliant mind and was an advanced and skilled practitioner. So this is not a trivial topic.

I have a personal history with dependent co-arising. Over the years I listened to many, many Dharma talks and read many books on the subject. None of them made sense to me. It all sounded like a lot of hand-

waving. I was never convinced that anyone who was teaching dependent co-arising understood it.

Then one day I was talking to a friend of mine about my frustration, and she pointed me to the one source that does make sense to me. The name of the book is *The Shape of Suffering*. It is by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. Ṭhānissaro also has a shorter explanation in his book *The Wings to Awakening* in the section on kamma. If you want a thorough explanation of dependent co-arising, these are the places to look. Here I will summarize the main points.

Modern Models

The use of “co-” in the English terms for Buddhist causality shows that it is not like a row of dominoes, one knocking down the next in a linear fashion. This is the flaw in the wheel model. Dependent co-arising is the more complex causation found in non-linear systems such as the weather and climate change.

We are fortunate to live in a time when we have a language with which to discuss the Buddha’s teachings on causation. We have physical and philosophical models on which to draw. This puts our ancestors at something of a disadvantage. I think this is one of the reasons why teachings on causality that came after the Buddha’s death are often off the mark.

One of those modern models is the “butterfly effect,” the term famously coined by the MIT meteorologist Edward Lorenz. It refers to how the flapping of a butterfly’s wings can affect a hurricane several weeks later. Minute changes in non-linear systems can have dramatic and greatly amplified effects in the output.

Another model is quantum physics. When I was growing up, even though we knew better by then, I learned that the elements in the periodic table make up everything in the universe. They are the basic building blocks. But quantum physics describes the world underlying

those elements. The elements exist only as long as the proper causes and conditions make them exist:

And so, having studied the atom, I am telling you that there is no matter as such. All matter arises and persists only due to a force that causes the atomic particles to vibrate, holding them together in the tiniest of solar systems, the atom. - [Max Planck]

(This is not to say that quantum physics and the butterfly effect are the same as Buddhist causality, only that they are analogous.)

Planck's idea of "particles vibrating" has a Buddhist corollary. I once heard a monk talk about the different realms in the Buddhist cosmology (a later topic), and he suggested that these different realms exist in the same physical space as our realm. They are just at a different vibrational frequency. We know that most of the physical world is empty space. We usually think of heaven as being above us and hell as being below us. He was saying that vibrationally speaking, heaven is right next-door, as is hell. One reason that we can occasionally see beings like ghosts is that their vibrational frequency is close to ours.

The Buddha described life in a similar way to quantum physics. There are causes and conditions, and they give rise to results. Those results become causes and conditions for other results. We don't live in a world of things; we live in a world of processes, a world of phenomena. The modern term for this is "radical phenomenology." It's a world where "nothing exists, everything happens."

When Darwinists, who had been so castigated in the West for their theory of evolution, went to Japan in the 19th century, they were shocked to discover that their ideas were embraced and celebrated. Buddhism heavily influences the Japanese, and Buddhists used Darwinism as proof that what they had said all along was true; everything changes all the time. Rather than running counter to the accepted norm in religious thinking, it gave it credence.

When you turn your attention from the physical world to the mind, you see the same process. Your mind is not the same from moment to moment. Your mind is not now where it was even a second ago. Of course, we have habits and tendencies and temperaments. But changing the underlying causes and conditions also changes the results. Our minds are like weather systems, and that makes it possible for us to change. It is actually good news.

Thus, we can say several things about causation:

1. Causation is non-linear.
2. Feedback loops can accelerate internal “sub-chains.”
3. Small changes can greatly amplify the results.
4. We live in a world of processes and phenomena, not solid things. Nothing exists; everything happens.

The Twelve Link Chain of Dependent Co-arising

“And what, bhikkhus, is dependent origination? With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, existence; with existence as condition, birth; with birth as condition, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. This, bhikkhus, is called dependent origination.” - [SN 12.1]

The chain starts with ignorance. In this case, ignorance means ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, but it includes all the wisdom teachings that

we are discussing. It is a lack of right view. But this is not intellectual knowledge; it is an inability to penetrate right view through direct experience. We cannot just read about it and be free from our suffering.

Next, we see that with ignorance as a condition, volitional formations arise. The term “volitional” indicates that these are willful actions. There is an intention behind them. Thānissaro calls them “fabrications.” (The Pāli term is the famously enigmatic word “saṅkhāra.”) We are actually fabricating our experience, and those fabrications arise out of ignorance.

These fabrications are of three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental. The latter are mainly thoughts but include any mental activity. More subtly, behind every action is an intention, a slight stirring that precedes every action. This intention is also a fabrication. We are constantly engaged in actions of some type. And it isn't that ignorance causes them; it is simply that they arise with ignorance as a condition. Where there is a volitional formation/fabrication, there is also ignorance, i.e., the earth does not cause a seed to sprout, but it is a necessary condition.

This is how volitional formations play out during a lifetime. But there is also a transcendent aspect to these phenomena. There is a mundane or worldly mode in which causality operates and a transcendent mode. The latter has to do with rebirth and cosmology. The volitional formations are what continue from lifetime to lifetime. It is karmic momentum.

With these volitional formations as a condition, consciousness arises. The word “consciousness” gets used in a number of different contexts in Buddhism. In this case, in the worldly sense, consciousness means awareness, i.e., you are conscious of your actions.

In the transcendent sense, consciousness is what enters a new being at conception. This is “rebirth consciousness.”

Once consciousness arises, it gives rise to name-and-form. “Name” is a mental response to your awareness. This can be a feeling, a perception, thought, etc. Likewise, there may be a physical or “form” response. Your blood pressure may go up; you may feel flushed, etc.

On the transcendent level, name-and-form refers to the mind and body of a being. This is sometimes called “mentality-materiality,” or more simply “mind and body.” Thus, the rebirth consciousness is a condition for the mind and body of the being that is reborn.

The “mind and body,” then, are necessary conditions for the six senses. You cannot have senses without a mind and a body. In Buddhism there are six senses, the sixth being the mind. The mind is a sense because it has a sense organ (eye, ear, nose, etc.), a sense object (something you see, hear, a smell, etc.), and sense consciousness. Without sense consciousness there cannot be a sense. A dead person has sense organs and there are sense objects, but there is no sense consciousness.

In the case of the mind sense, the sense organ is the brain, the sense object is mental formations (thoughts, perceptions, etc.), and mind consciousness is the awareness of mental formations.

In the transcendent case, I think you can see where this is all headed. The new human being develops senses as it grows into a material being.

With the senses as a condition, there is contact. An eye sees a form; an ear hears a sound, etc.

Contact gives rise to feeling. This is not an emotion the way we usually think of it. Feeling is the feeling tone of the sense experience: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is similar to the reptile brain which can only distinguish between friend, foe, and harmless.

Once a feeling has arisen, craving arises. This is also the Second Noble Truth. “Craving” is shorthand for how we respond to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences. Craving is a response to pleasant feelings. We want them. Aversion is our response to unpleasant feelings. We don’t want them. And with neutral feelings we are ambivalent. As Sharon Salzberg says, we space out.

This is how we spend our lives. We are living in a constant stream of

wanting this, not wanting that, and spacing out. One of the things toward which we are working is the ability to “be in the midst of our own experience.” [Sharon Salzberg] You can develop your concentration so that when feelings arise, you skip the craving, aversion, and spacing out. This is equanimity, and it is incredibly liberating. It is a taste of final liberation, nirvāṇa.

Equanimity may sound like a rather banal, neutral state, but it is not. It is highly charged. Usually the push and pull of craving and aversion weighs us down. Once we are free from that, the mind is free. There is a sense of lightness and buoyancy and clarity. Equanimity is a state free of stress.

This is one reason we are developing concentration, so we can see this happening. The untrained mind is not strong enough to see it. It is like trying to look at the moon through an unfocused and wobbling telescope. We have to get the mind calm and steady. Then you can catch yourself in cycles of craving, aversion, and spacing out. A concentrated mind is also more stable. It is not as easily seduced by craving.

Craving can be abandoned along with the stress it causes. Most people have experienced that. You feel hungry and you want to eat. But then you get wrapped up in something else, and you forget about your hunger. It may be hours later that you remember that you felt hungry, but by then you no longer feel hungry. The craving is gone. And in fact, you can train yourself not to react to feelings of hunger. You can simply watch them arise and pass away until they are gone. You can even stop them from arising at all. There will be just a slight stirring, a slight sensation, then nothing.

The Buddha described three types of craving. There is sense craving. There is craving for existence. This plays out in our inability to attain final liberation, which ends the rounds of rebirth. You cannot end rebirth if you are attached to material existence. And there is craving for non-existence. People who commit suicide and nihilists have this type of craving, as do some philosophical materialists. (Philosophical

materialists only believe in the physical world.)

Clinging comes next in the chain. Craving is something we want but don't have. Clinging is something we have and we want to hold on to. We have a new car and it gets stolen. Our distress is from clinging.

The Buddha defined four types of clinging: sense clinging, clinging to views, clinging to rites and rituals, and clinging to a doctrine of self.

Clinging to views is the characteristic of people who are very opinionated. When I worked as an engineer, I called this "falling in love with your own ideas." One of the benefits of working in a field like engineering or science is that it can loosen your grip on opinions. The physical world, which in my case was the computer, doesn't really care about your opinions. If something doesn't work, it doesn't work (i.e., the bridge falls down).

The Buddha said this about clinging to views:

"When a bhikkhu adheres to his own views, holds to them tenaciously, and relinquishes them with difficulty, he dwells without respect and deference toward the Teacher, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, and he does not fulfill the training. Such a bhikkhu creates a dispute in the Saṅgha that leads to the harm of many people, to the unhappiness of many people, to the ruin, harm, and suffering of devas and humans." - [AN 6.36]

I heard a teacher once paraphrase this as "opinionated people just go around annoying each other." They also annoy everyone else.

Clinging to rites and rituals had particular meaning during the Buddha's lifetime because the Vedic religion (Brahmanism) centered on rituals. (Apparently it didn't occur to the kṣatriyas, who were about to lose their place at the top of the social food chain, that it was the brahmin priests who made their livings from those rituals.) Of course, there are plenty of

people who believe in rites and rituals today. There are even schools of Buddhism that have many rites and rituals.

And finally, there is clinging to a doctrine of self. This would be a permanent, unchanging self. We will discuss this subject in detail later.

In the first stage of awakening, two types of clinging are overcome: clinging to rights and rituals and clinging to a doctrine of self. (The third factor is eliminating doubt in the Buddha's teaching.) We will also discuss this subject later.

The next step is translated here as "existence." I prefer the word "becoming." In the worldly sense, "becoming" is taking on a role. It is the process of self-identifying. This happens a lot in families. You are the youngest child, and even when you are 70 years old, you take on that role as the youngest child. Or you go to law school and take the bar. Working as an attorney is something you do. But then you self-identify as a lawyer. It is who you think you are. You say something like "I am a lawyer" and not "I work as a lawyer."

Someone cuts you off in traffic. Where it becomes suffering is when it happens to "me." That person cut "me" off. It's not just an event, but something that happened to "me." You "become" the person who was cut off. Abandoning "becoming" eliminates a great deal of suffering. You see how you turn causes and conditions and events into something they are not, and that is that they happen to "me."

(This is not to suggest that you become reckless. It is wisdom that keeps you safe. The trick is to tease out the wisdom from the aversion.)

"Becoming" is the process of self-identifying. The Buddha spoke about the folly of self-identification, especially because everything that happens is impermanent. The Buddha said this to his son Rāhula:

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, venerable sir."

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’”

“No, venerable sir.” - [SN 35.12]

Our thoughts, bodies, feelings, perceptions, everything that we experience arises and passes away. So when you self-identify with any of them, it is like equating yourself with an illusion. When that person cuts you off in traffic and you self-identify with the anger, where do you go when the anger passes? People usually say, “I am angry.” It is like an equation: I = anger. But then the anger passes. So then what does I =? Where did you go?

And this is where you see clinging as a condition for becoming. If we don’t cling to our senses, our views, or a self, then it is very hard to become, to self-identify.

The Buddha described three types of becoming: sense becoming, form becoming, and formless becoming [AN 3.76]. Sense becoming is self-identifying with sensory experiences like anger. In the transcendent model, the latter two are the easiest to understand. Form becoming is the desire to acquire a physical form. As for formless becoming, in the Buddhist cosmology there are formless realms into which one can be reborn. They correspond to the immaterial states in meditation. So it is possible to lose a desire for form rebirth but still retain a desire for formless rebirth.

Becoming is the condition for birth. In the worldly sense, birth gives final, full expression to the act of becoming. “I am a lawyer.” The urge to self-identify now takes on a life of its own.

And of course in the transcendent case, birth literally means birth, the taking of form into a new body.

All of this naturally ends in aging and death, or as the passage says,

“aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.”

The Non-linear Nature of Dependent Co-arising

The previous section describes the links in the chain of dependent co-arising and shows how each link is a precondition for the next link. But as noted, this is not a linear sequence. For example, a mental action like a thought can lead to a verbal action. You say something. That leads to a physical action; you make a physical gesture. Or you have a perception, which is name-and-form, and consciousness arises in response to that.

Let’s look at an expanded outline view of the chain. Note that the terminology here is slightly different from the previous translation:

1. **Ignorance:** *not seeing things in terms of the Four Noble Truths of stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation.*
2. **Fabrication:** *the process of intentionally shaping states of body and mind. These processes are of three sorts:*
 - a. *Bodily fabrication: the in-and-out-breath.*
 - b. *Verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation.*
 - c. *Mental fabrication: feeling (feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain) and perception (the mental labels applied to the objects of the senses for the purpose of memory and recognition)*
3. **Consciousness:** *at the six sense media: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect.*
4. **Name-and-form:** *mental and physical phenomena.*

Mental phenomena include:

 - a. *Feeling*
 - b. *Perception*
 - c. *Intention*
 - d. *Contact*
 - e. *Attention*

Physical phenomena include:

- f. Earth (solidity)
- g. Water (liquidity)
- h. Wind (energy and motion)
- i. Fire (warmth)

5. The **six internal sense media**: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect.
6. **Contact**: at the six sense media. (Contact happens when a sense organ meets with a sense object - for example, the eye meets with a form - conditioning an act of consciousness at that sense organ. The meeting of all three - the sense organ, the object, and the act of consciousness - counts as contact.)
7. **Feeling**: based on contact at the six sense media.
8. **Craving**: for the objects of the six sense media. This craving can focus on any of the six sense media, and can take any of three forms:
 - a. Sensuality-craving (craving for sensual plans and resolves).
 - b. Becoming-craving (craving to assume an identity in a world of experience).
 - c. Non-becoming-craving (craving for the end of an identity in a world of experience).
9. **Clinging**: passion and delight focused on the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. This clinging can take any of four forms:
 - a. Sensuality-clinging
 - b. View-clinging
 - c. Habit-and-practice-clinging
 - d. Doctrine-of-self-clinging
10. **Becoming**: on any of three levels:
 - a. The level of sensuality
 - b. The level of form
 - c. The level of formlessness
11. **Birth**: the assumption of an identity on any of these three levels.
12. The **aging-and-death** of that identity, with its attendant sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and

despair.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Shape of Suffering*]

Thānissaro gives this real world example:

*As you walk to the door of your parents' house, thinking about the situation (2b - **verbal fabrication**), you pull up memories of things your uncle has done in the past (2c - **mental fabrication**). This provokes anger, causing your breathing to become labored and tight (2a - **bodily fabrication**). This makes you uncomfortable (2c - **mental fabrication**), and you are aware of how uncomfortable you feel (3 - **consciousness**). Hormones are released into your bloodstream (4f through 4i - **form**). Without being fully aware that you are making a choice, you choose (4c - **intention**) to focus (4e - **attention**) on the **perception** (4b) of how trapped you feel in this situation. Your **consciousness** of this idea (5 and 6 - **mental contact**) feels oppressive (7 - **feeling**). You want to find a way out (8 - **craving**). At this point, you can think of a number of roles you could play in the upcoming dinner (9d and 10 - **clinging and becoming**). You might refuse to speak with your uncle, you might try to be as unobtrusive as possible to get through the dinner without incident, or you might be more aggressive and confront your uncle about his behavior. You mentally take on one of these roles (11 - **birth**), but unless you keep your imaginary role actively in mind, it falls away as soon as you think of it (12 - **aging and death**). So you keep thinking about it, evaluating how your parents will react to it, how you will feel about it, and so on (2b - **verbal fabrication**). Although the stress of step (12) in this case is not great, the fact that your role has to be kept in mind*

and repeatedly evaluated is stressful, and you can go through many sequences of stress in this way in the course of a few moments.

Here is a diagram of the example:

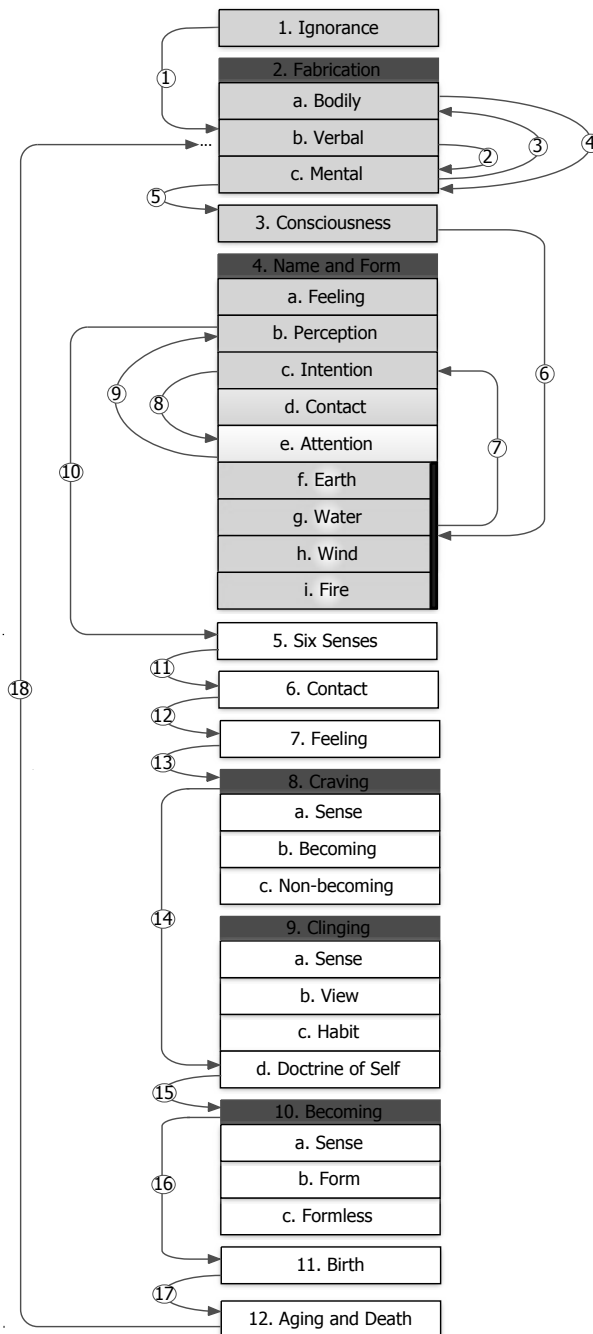


Figure: Causality Example Diagram

To further complicate this picture, the factors within the sequence can feed back into one another before completing a full sequence. This is the meaning of the specific factors and sub-factors that occur in different positions within the sequence. **Feeling**, for instance , appears in at least four factors of the list (counting the suffering in factor 12 as a **feeling** as well).

Consciousness, appears twice, as does **perception**. In each of these cases, a later appearance of the factor, instead of leading directly to the factor following it in the list, can be treated once more in the role it plays in an earlier appearance. (This fact accounts for the way in which the mind can spin through many cycles of thought before coming up with a definite decision to take action on a matter.) For example, a feeling of pain appearing in (7), instead of inevitably leading straight to **craving**, could be treated as a type of **mental fabrication** (2c) or as an event under **name** (4a). If, as a mental fabrication, it is subjected to further **ignorance**, that would simply compound the stress in the subsequent cycle through the causal change. A similar result would occur if, as an event under **name**, it is subjected to further inappropriate **attention** (4e), which is equivalent to **ignorance**. In terms of Scenario A, this would correspond to the point at which you feel oppressed at the prospect of going to the dinner. If you keep focusing on this feeling in an ignorant or inappropriate way, you simply compound the stress of your situation, enflaming the sense of oppression until it becomes unmanageable.

However, if the **feeling** in (7) is treated with **knowledge** as a type of **mental fabrication** (2c) or with **appropriate attention** (4e) - another synonym for

knowledge - as an instance of **name**, that would redirect the sequence in a skillful way, reducing the amount of suffering and stress produced. For example, if - when you start feeling oppressed at the prospect of the upcoming dinner - you reflect on the fact that your labored breathing is causing unnecessary stress, you can stop to adjust your breathing so that it feels more refreshed (2a). You can think about the situation in different ways, seeing the dinner as an opportunity to develop skillful qualities of the path, such as right resolve and right speech (2b). You can remember the positive things that your uncle has done in the past, and your own personal need to think in that way (2c). You can make up your mind to do or say whatever seems most skillful in the situation (4c). In this way, you can defuse the sense of oppression and abort the particular sufferings it would have caused.

In this way, although the reappearance of **feeling** at different points in dependent co-arising has the potential for compounding the problem of stress and suffering, it also opens the opportunity for a particular sequence of suffering to be alleviated. The fact that a long sequence of dependent co-arising requires the repeated occurrence of many short sequences - full or partial - similarly offers the opportunity for unraveling it at any time, simply by unraveling any one of the short sequences.

For these reasons, it is best not to view dependent co-arising as a circle, for such a simplistic image does not do justice to the many different time frames simultaneously at work in the production of suffering. Nor does it do justice to the ways in which the complexity of dependent

co-arising provides an opening for suffering to be brought to an end. A better image would be to view dependent co-arising as a complex interplay of many feedback loops that, if approached with ignorance, can produce compounded suffering or, if approached with knowledge, create repeated opportunities to redirect the sequence and dampen the experience of suffering or stress.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Shape of Suffering*]

There are three main points here:

1. You see how the mind spins out of control. The untrained mind gets into a feedback loop, like a speaker that is too close to a microphone. You have had this experience with craving. You really want something, and then you want it more and more. It becomes an obsession. Or you have something like a car or a house, or someone, like a lover, and you cling to that thing or that person. This gives rise to fear and anxiety or depression. It is also true of confusion, where you don't know what to do about something, and you become increasingly desperate.
2. The antidote is to a) see what is happening and then b) break the cycle. The classic way to do this is to bring your attention back to the breath. This acts as a shock absorber for the spinning mind. It slows everything down and dampens the cycle. Mettā is the antidote for aversive mind states.
3. It is important to remember this teaching - keep it in mind - so that you can see links in the chain when they manifest.

This is why the breath is such a good meditation object. It is always available. And using the 80-20 rule, where 20% of your attention is on the breath, you can use it while you are doing anything, even brain surgery.

This may seem overwhelming. It is a lot to remember, a lot to “keep in mind.” I have two suggestions. The first suggestion is to determine which link(s) in the chain you can see most easily. Start by working with that

one. That might be becoming, or craving, or clinging, but it could be any one.

The other suggestion is to keep coming back to this topic. After a while you will remember most of the chain, at least the links that you can see most clearly.

The Reverse Chain of Dependent Co-arising

Thus, bhikkhus, with ignorance as proximate cause, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as proximate cause, consciousness; with consciousness as proximate cause, name-and-form; with name-and-form as proximate cause, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as proximate cause, contact; with contact as proximate cause, feeling; with feeling as proximate cause, craving; with craving as proximate cause, clinging; with clinging as proximate cause, existence; with existence as proximate cause, birth; with birth as proximate cause, suffering; with suffering as proximate cause, faith; with faith as proximate cause, gladness; with gladness as proximate cause, rapture; with rapture as proximate cause, tranquility; with tranquility as proximate cause, happiness; with happiness as proximate cause, concentration; with concentration as proximate cause, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are; with the knowledge and vision of things as they really are as proximate cause, revulsion; with revulsion as proximate cause, dispassion; with dispassion as proximate cause, liberation; with liberation as proximate cause, the knowledge of destruction. - [SN 12.23]

In this rather dense quote, the Buddha offered us a way out of suffering.

Usually suffering leads to confusion. But in this case, suffering leads to faith:

1. **Suffering:** *One is conscious of suffering, so the inevitable progression of birth, aging, and death is not mindless. This awareness allows the emergence of a solution. This is the First Noble Truth, that suffering is to be understood.*
2. **Faith:** *This is the first glimpse that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Faith is needed at this juncture because it is all you have to rely on.*
3. **Joy:** *The first result of faith is an emotional lightening. This is the pure happiness that arises from devotional practice.*
4. **Rapture:** *The intensification of that joy together with a deepening unification of mind gives rise to rapture. This is a factor of the first two jhānas.*
5. **Tranquility:** *This is the deep meditative peace that is on the other side of joy and rapture.*
6. **Bliss:** *This is the subtle happiness of the calmed and purified mind and the bliss of practicing the path.*
7. **Concentration:** *This is the fully unified state of mind. This mind is wieldy and malleable, one that is fit to do the work of insight.*
8. **Knowledge and Vision of Things as They Are:** *This is insight. It is a direct understanding of mind and body, the rise and fall of phenomena, and the three characteristics of suffering, impermanence, and not-self.*
9. **Disenchantment:** *Having seen things in their real nature one becomes disenchanted with conventional existence, like one awakening from a*

magic spell. Having seen reality clearly one is no longer fooled thereby.

10. **Dispersion:** *Having seen things in their real nature one becomes dis-encharmed with conventional existence. It is like awakening from a magic spell. Having seen reality clearly one is no longer fooled thereby.*
11. **Liberation:** *Without the motive force of desire for becoming, the wheel is broken and saṃsāra transcended. This is the realization of nibbāna, the ultimate human experience.*
12. **Knowledge of Destruction of the Cankers:** *This is the enjoyment of the fruit, an end to all suffering and defilement.*

(Based on the exposition by Ajahn Punnadhammo, Arrow River Hermitage, Internet search: "[dependent origination arrow river](#)")

Here things begin to turn at suffering. Instead of continuing to chase after sense pleasures, we look for a better way. This is what the Buddha did. He examined his luxurious life and saw that it was ultimately unsatisfying. That is when he left home to become a spiritual seeker. He didn't know that there was an answer, but he had faith that there was something better.

Notice how positive these five factors are: joy, rapture, tranquility, bliss, and concentration. Meditation should be a pleasant undertaking. Of course meditation requires effort, and it isn't always easy. But the effort should be cultivating positive mind states. This is the sense of well-being that we are trying to establish. This provides the foundation for insight. A concentrated, happy mind can be with difficult mind states more easily because it does not get wrapped up in them. The difficult mind states arise in a field of contentment. It is also less reactive.

Some teachers say that meditation is not about developing mind states.

There is some truth in that. But most of the path is indeed about developing wholesome mind states and abandoning unwholesome mind states. We have already seen the Buddha say this:

“Again, Udāyin, I have proclaimed to my disciples the way to develop the four right kinds of striving. Here a bhikkhu awakens zeal for the non-arising of unarisen evil unwholesome states, and he makes effort, arouses energy, exerts his mind, and strives. He awakens zeal for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states... He awakens zeal for the arising of unarisen wholesome states... He awakens zeal for the continuance, non-disappearance, strengthening, increase, and fulfillment by development of arisen wholesome states, and he makes effort, arouses energy, exerts his mind, and strives. And thereby many disciples of mine abide having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge.” - [MN 77.16]

As your concentration improves, you see how unsatisfying it is to chase after sense pleasures. This leads to dispassion. You lose interest in sense pleasures. You see how sense pleasures are running your life. Once you see the futility of chasing after sense pleasures, they lose their grip on you. You’ve done things like eating countless times, but you still get hungry. Eating never has an end that is satisfying. It is an addiction. How strong that addiction is depends on your mind state at the moment it arises.

You still have to eat, of course, and you may still have preferences. But not eating starts to become no big deal, and you lose interest in the optional sense pleasures. You can be happy with a good meal, happy with a bad meal, happy with no meal.

Attaining Final Liberation - Nirvāṇa

The teaching of dependent origination also shows how the round of existence can be broken. With the arising of true knowledge, full penetration of the Four Noble Truths, ignorance is eradicated. Consequently the mind no longer indulges in craving and clinging, action loses its potential to generate rebirth, and deprived thus of its fuel, the round comes to an end. This marks the goal of the teaching signaled by the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering.

- [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Introduction]

The ability to see dependent co-arising as dependent co-arising is a first step in developing the clear knowledge that brings ignorance to an end.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Shape of Suffering*]

You will see the links of dependent co-arising as your concentration improves. Strong concentration has two main effects. The first is that your meditation will become more pleasant, tranquil, and serene. It will be more enjoyable.

The second is that you will see the process of dependent co-arising. Your concentration, bound with knowledge of right view, penetrates the chain. You see becoming; you see craving; you see clinging; you see feelings; you see the process of fabrication. And instead of these habitual patterns running amok, you begin picking them off at mid-stream.

When the skills appropriate to the Noble Eightfold Path are consistently and masterfully applied to dependent co-arising, they can cause the entire system of suffering and its causes to collapse.

This is because this knowledge brings about a form of vision that inclines neither to becoming nor to non-becoming. This mode of vision functions as a resonance in that it causes the many feedback loops connected with becoming or non-becoming to become undefined. If applied consistently enough, this mode of vision can have a cascading effect, causing all the feedback loops in dependent co-arising to become undefined, thus bringing about the collapse of the entire system.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Shape of Suffering*]

Summary

In this chapter we studied the Buddha's teachings on causality:

1. Dependent co-arising is a complex, non-linear system.
2. Being caught in the chain leads to suffering.
3. The reverse chain of dependent co-arising, starting with faith, leads out of suffering.
4. Concentration and insight develop dispassion for sense pleasures and sharpen our ability to see the links in the chain when they arise.

The Three Characteristics

All conditioned phenomena have three characteristics. In Pāli these terms are *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. That is, all phenomena are 1) impermanent/inconstant/unreliable, 2) suffering/stressful, and 3) non-self.

Let's start with the standard formula. Here is how the Buddha described them in the *Majjhima Nikāya*:

"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self?'"

"No, venerable sir."

"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is feeling...Is perception... Are formations... Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, venerable sir."

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.” - [MN 22.26-27]

Let’s take a look at what he meant.

Anicca: Impermanence

“Bhikkhus, you may well acquire that possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and that might endure as long as eternity. But do you see any such possession, bhikkhus?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Good, bhikkhus. I too do not see any possession that is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and that might endure as long as eternity.” - [MN 22.22]

The Pāli term “annica” is usually translated as “impermanence,” but that does not capture the essence of the word. Most people, after modest reflection, can see that everything is impermanent. Even the universe itself will collapse, so that does not leave much of a future for the corner drug store. But given the time frame, very few people worry about that. On a much shorter time frame, people are not even concerned with their own mortality until it becomes a reality. Sometimes even that does not get their attention.

The Buddha’s teachings on this topic are subtle. As we have seen, we live in a causal universe. It is a world of causes and conditions and not things. Life is like the ocean, rising and falling moment by moment. But we are not mere pawns in a relentless sea of change. Our choices shape our experience. Our past karma is like the hand we are dealt in poker; our present karma and our present choices are how we play that hand. So the

first step is to make skillful choices. We shape our experience and not just become victims to it. Thus the teachings on virtue, concentration, and wisdom help us to fabricate a better outcome.

The law of impermanence has good news and bad news. The good news is that impermanence is empowering. If our lives were pre-determined or controlled by some higher power or simply random and chaotic, then there would be nothing we can do to make them better.

But in a world of causes and conditions, what we do matters. We shape our experience of the present and we work toward a brighter future by making wise choices. Of course, that is not to deny the fruition of past karma or the uncontrollable circumstances like the weather or shifting tectonic plates. But one of the things that practice teaches us is not to worry about those things. We can't do anything about them, but we can choose how to respond to them. That is where we put our energy. You are a pilot in a plane. You can't control the weather, but you can control the plane.

We shape both the events of our lives and how we experience those events. We shape the events of our lives by being virtuous. We shape our experience of those events by cultivating a more skillful mind, one that is happy, contented, and equanimous.

We have already discussed how the practice of virtue affects our experience of the present and the future. Our perceptions can be healthier, more skillful, and more pleasant. Even our experience of feelings as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral can change. A simple example is food. There are foods that we like as children and don't like as adults. The converse is also true. The food is the same, but our experience of it changes.

Some people say that you can experience the present moment in a way that is divorced from any pre-conditioning. This is not possible. Our experience of the present moment is always conditioned. The only thing that is unconditioned is nirvāṇa. This is why two people can be in the

same circumstances but experience it in two different ways.

Some years ago I had a job working with high-resolution video boards for computers. That is when people still used film in cameras, and a hot topic was why the color in prints did not look like the color in real objects. Kodak spent a lot of time trying to figure this out. It turns out that the reason has nothing to do with film technology. When you look at a fire engine, the mind knows the context, and it applies certain rules to what you see. But when you look at a photograph of a fire engine, the mind knows that it is looking at a picture and it applies different rules. Thus, it is technically impossible to render the fire engine in the same way in a photograph as in real life unless you can fool the mind into thinking it is looking at a real fire engine.

Our experience of the present moment is always conditioned by our mind, but that conditioning is also impermanent and constantly changing. That change can happen in a negative or a positive way. As people get older, they sometimes become bitter and angry, and this makes their experience of the present moment more unpleasant and less skillful. One of the things that we are trying to do is develop the mind in a positive and more skillful way.

While a belief in rebirth is not necessary to benefit from the Buddha's teachings, it is very helpful in some circumstances. Sometimes our life situation is such that the immediate future looks pretty bleak. During World War II there were people in concentration camps who comforted others even as they were dying. In that type of situation, it is helpful to have an understanding of the bigger picture and the ultimate value of virtue.

The bad news about impermanence is that while we can improve our experience of the present moment, and we can improve the odds of being happy and useful, even that is inconstant and unreliable. Planes crash. Tectonic plates move. Wars are fought. It is an uncertain world. That is why ultimately we want to go beyond conditioned experience.

We begin by learning how to develop better causes and conditions for better results. Then we get to the place where our happiness is unconditioned, where it is certain.

Dukkha: Suffering/Stress

“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.” - [MN 56.11]

The Pāli word “dukkha” is usually translated as “suffering.” Some people find that word too strong. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that when he was in Thailand, someone complained to him that Buddhists are always talking about suffering. He said to Ṭhānissaro, “I don’t suffer.” So Ṭhānissaro said to him, “Well, do you have stress in your life?” The man said, well, oh, yeah, I have a lot of stress in my life. So Ṭhānissaro prefers the word “stress” to “suffering.” Everyone can relate to stress.

Buddhism gets a reputation for being pessimistic because of the First Noble Truth. But notice how the Buddha described suffering. He did not say that life is suffering. This is a common misunderstanding. He listed specific types of suffering. Birth is suffering. Death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what we want is suffering. The five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering. He gave us examples of suffering, an inventory. He never actually defined the term.

This is quite a hot button issue. In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II said:

“...the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving from it have an almost exclusively negative soteriology

(doctrine of salvation)."

Ajahn Punnadhammo notes that this belief is not just a problem with non-Buddhists:

This is not a criticism limited to the Catholics, either. Many who are in partial sympathy with Buddhist ideas voice similar objections. For instance, on a web-site called "A Call for a New Buddhism" we find the following;

1) Life is suffering. Is human life essentially painful from the moment of birth to the moment of death? Even ordinary life can be full of fun, adventure, friends, romance, good food, music and art. In many ways Buddhism has become an anti-life religion that appeals to those who always see the glass half empty rather than half full. Why should we deny the fact that life can be an enjoyable adventure and not just a pitiful veil of tears?

- [Ajahn Punnadhammo, "[Is Buddhism Negative?](#)"]

I love his response:

On one occasion someone [asked me] why Buddhists only talk about suffering and I couldn't resist replying that that isn't true, we also talk about grief, pain, lamentation, misery and despair.

- [Ajahn Punnadhammo]

Once he pries his tongue out of his cheek, Ajahn Punnadhammo goes on to say:

The objection comes primarily from a reading of the First Noble Truth (in translation) as "Life is suffering." Part of

the problem is that old bug-bear, translation. I've said it before, and I'll no doubt say it again, languages are not perfectly isomorphic. Pāli does not completely map into English on a word for word basis. The Pāli word translated as "suffering" is "dukkha" which is much broader than the English word. In some contexts, suffering works well enough but the problem comes when we encounter the teaching that all conditioned experience is dukkha and translate that as suffering. A poke in the eye with a sharp stick is both suffering and dukkha. A delicious slice of rhubarb pie is dukkha but it certainly isn't suffering.

So what exactly is dukkha then? It is a universal characteristic of all conditioned phenomena experienced with the physical senses or the mind. It points to that aspect shared by all such experience as being imperfect, unsatisfactory, in some way incomplete or provisional. Some experiences can give us joy, but no experience can be completely sufficient. There is never enough rhubarb pie.

- [Ajahn Punnadhammo]

In other words, there are limits to what sense pleasures can provide.

My experience with the practice is that I actually enjoy sense pleasures more because there is no clinging or craving getting in the way. I can simply enjoy sensory experiences in the moment. And when the moment passes, it passes, free from the angst of wanting more or wanting it again and again and again.

I have used the term "five aggregates" without defining it, so here is a good time to do that. As the Buddha said in the above quote, here the "five aggregates subject to clinging" are suffering.

According to the Buddha, there are five aspects to conditioned human experience:

1. **The body**
2. **Feelings** - the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience of the senses
3. **Perception** - how we perceive, identify, or name our experience
4. **Mental fabrications** - our thoughts and emotions
5. **Consciousness** - our awareness of experience

In fact, these five aggregates can conflate to just two: mind and body.

These aspects of our experience are, of course, inconstant and unreliable (anicca). They change from moment to moment. It is our clinging to these inconstant, unreliable processes that causes stress.

When we experience pleasant sensations, we want to hold on to them. When we don't experience pleasant sensations, we seek them out. When we experience unpleasant sensations, we want them to go away. When we do not experience unpleasant sensations, we want to avoid them. This is the moment-by-moment struggle that we fight within ourselves. We are chasing sense pleasures around like mercury on a lab table.

Curiously, psychologists tell us that when we seek sense pleasures but are never satisfied, we pursue them even more aggressively. It is as if pounding our head on the table causes pain, so if we just pound a little harder the pain will stop.

What most of us experience when it comes to addiction is a pattern of continually seeking more of what it is we don't really want and, therefore, never being fully satisfied. And as long as we are never satisfied, we continue to seek more, while our real needs are never being met.

- [Sally Erickson, *What A Way To Go: Life at the End of*

Empire]

Fortunately, the Buddha had a better idea. We start by cultivating the pleasure born of seclusion. This is, at least, a healthier way of experiencing pleasure. No one has ever committed a crime due to serenity. And then, with patience and persistence, we go beyond that to nirvāṇa, the unconditioned.

Anatta: Non-self

Next comes one of the most misunderstood teachings of the Buddha, the teachings on “anattā,” or “not self.”

Let’s start with what anattā is not. It is not nihilism. You hear this so often in Buddhist circles that it has become a sort of mystical truism.

The Buddha never answered the question of whether there is a soul or a self. Rather, he consistently declared this is a topic that is of no value. It only serves as a distraction in the search for an end to suffering:

“Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention and he does not attend to those things fit for attention.

“This is how he attends unwisely: ‘Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?’ Or

else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?'" - [MN 2.6-7]

What he did say is that we suffer because we self-identify with the five aggregates of clinging. Let's look again at the beginning quote on the Three Characteristics:

"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self?'"

"No, venerable sir."

"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is feeling... Is perception... Are formations... Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self?'"

"No, venerable sir." - [MN 22.26-27]

If you substitute the words "inconstant and unreliable" for the word "impermanent," you can see how the meaning of the teaching becomes clear.

There are a couple of points here. First, the Buddha did not say that the five aggregates are the source of suffering. It is our clinging to them that

is the problem. On the contrary, the skillful use of the five aggregates is part of the solution to our problem. He then went on to say that anything that is inconstant and unreliable will lead to suffering, just like an old car or untrustworthy romance.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu says this:

The self strategy that the Buddha recommends using along the path derives from the question at the basis of discernment: “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” This question contains two ideas of self. The first is the idea of the self as agent, the producer of happiness; the second is the idea of the self as the consumer of happiness. When the question says, “What, when I do it,” the “I” here in “I do it” is the self as producer. The “my” in “my long-term welfare and happiness” is the self as consumer of happiness.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “[Selves and Not-self](#)”]

A healthy attitude toward one’s self is a good strategy. Being addicted to and self-identifying with inconstant and unreliable processes is not a good strategy. Developing virtue, concentration, and wisdom is a good strategy. The issue of whether there is a self is irrelevant, and it is a hindrance to awakening. Don’t worry; get happy.

Another way that the Buddha showed the Three Characteristics was by relating them to sense pleasures:

“Bhikkhus, sensual pleasures are impermanent, hollow, false, deceptive; they are illusory, the prattle of fools. Sensual pleasures here and now and sensual pleasures in lives to come, sensual perceptions here and now and sensual perceptions in lives to come; both alike are Māra’s realm, Māra’s domain, Māra’s bait, Māra’s hunting

ground. On account of them, these evil unwholesome mental states such as covetousness, ill will, and presumption arise, and they constitute an obstruction to a noble disciple in training here.” - [MN 106.2]

(“Māra” represents temptation.)

What is impermanent cannot be “regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’” He said this more explicitly elsewhere:

“Now there comes a time when the water element is disturbed and then the external earth element vanishes. When even this external earth element, great as it is, is seen to be impermanent, subject to destruction, disappearance, and change, what of this body, which is clung to by craving and lasts but a while? There can be no considering that as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am.’” - [MN 28.7]

The Buddha made two points here. One is particularly interesting from a scientific standpoint, and that is that the earth itself is impermanent. Given the era, that is an extraordinary statement. The second point is that if the body is the “self,” what happens when the body dies? The only way to reconcile the body as the “self” is to adopt a nihilistic point of view, one that has already been summarily rejected. The same is true for the other four aggregates, all of which are also impermanent.

But the most important issue is the clinging. We have already seen this in the context of dependent co-arising. And here the clinging is tightly bound with becoming. We self-identify with constantly changing phenomena. If we can put down the clinging, we can put down becoming, and we can save ourselves a lot of grief.

The Buddha is not making a metaphysical statement about whether we exist or do not exist or both exist and not exist or neither exist or not exist. It is about “how” not “what.” He described the process whereby we create suffering for ourselves, and how our self-identification with the

aggregates causes so much mischief in the world. When we self-identify with gender, race, nationality, religion, profession, even being human, we cause a lot of trouble.

Summary

The Three Characteristics of experience are as follows:

1. Impermanence - All phenomena are inconstant and unreliable.
2. Suffering - What is inconstant and unreliable is stressful.
3. Non-self - Anything that is a constantly changing process cannot be regarded as a permanent "self."

A useful tool in our practice is to see the process of becoming, whereby one self-identifies with the processes of body and mind.

A good strategy for the skillful pursuit of happiness is to develop dispassion for sense pleasure, replacing it with the pleasure born of seclusion. While this type of pleasure is still conditioned, it is much more skillful and less prone to mischief.

III. Daily Living

*“Mother, father are the east,
Teachers are the southward point,
Wife and children are the west,
Friends and colleagues are the north.
Servants and workers are below,
Ascetics, brahmins are above.
These directions all should be
Honored by a clansman true.
He who’s wise and disciplined,
Kindly and intelligent,
Humble, free from pride,
Such a one may honor gain.
Early rising, scorning sloth,
Unshaken by adversity,
Of faultless conduct, ready wit,
Such a one may honor gain.
Making friends, and keeping them,
Welcoming, no stingy host,
A guide, philosopher and friend,
Such a one may honor gain.
Giving gifts and kindly speech,
A life well-spent for others’ good,
Even-handed in all things,
Impartial as each case demands:
These things make the world go round
Like the chariot’s axle-pin.
If such things did not exist,
No mother from her son would get
Any honor and respect,*

*Nor father either, as their due.
But since these qualities are held
By the wise in high esteem,
They are given prominence
And are rightly praised by all."*

- [DN 31.34]

The way that Buddhism landed in the West is not the same as it is traditionally practiced in Asia. Asian Buddhism is centered around the monasteries and temples. Lay Buddhists practice generosity by supporting the monks and nuns. They give alms-food. They spend Uposatha Days at a monastery or a temple where they follow the Eight Precepts. For the most part lay Buddhists in Asia do not meditate.

("Uposatha days" are special practice days. They are traditionally held on the new moon and full moon days of the lunar month. This is the day when monastics gather to recite the monastic rules and confess any transgressions. Lay people observe either the Five Precepts or, if they spend the day at a temple or monastery, the Eight Precepts.)

But in the West, our practice is mainly based in the laity. Most lay Buddhists here do meditate. We practice in a way that lies somewhere between Asian lay practice and monastic practice. In doing this, we have created a challenge for ourselves.

Monastics have rules laid down in the Vinaya that control almost every part of their lives. The large number of rules may sound restrictive, but it actually makes their lives simple. They do not have to spend time and energy thinking about what appropriate behavior is. That is already defined.

The Saṅgha takes care of their needs. If they are sick or dying, the Saṅgha takes care of them. When someone ordains, this is also called "home-leaving." They leave their biological families and enter the family of the Saṅgha. Ordaining as a monk or nun may sound restrictive to a layperson, but it is actually quite liberating. And it makes practicing the

Dharma simple and optimal.

Life for lay Buddhists is more complicated. We spend a lot of our lives dealing with right livelihood. A monk or a nun is by definition practicing right livelihood. The Buddha gives lay people some guidance on what right livelihood is, but there is a lot of gray area.

We also spend a lot of time on relationships. This includes our families, spouses and significant others, co-workers, and neighbors. Sometimes these relationships are quite complicated and difficult. Monks and nuns have rules that govern their relationships, and they have rules for resolving disputes. But we are in the outside world. There are no rules for how people treat each other. There may be extreme cases like sexual abuse or being financially swindled. Work relationships tend to be particularly difficult.

Many of us also belong to lay Buddhist communities. This offers, at least, a common approach to life. But lay Buddhist groups lack the moral authority and guidance of monastics, who are religious professionals.

In Asia, lay Buddhists follow the Five Precepts, practice generosity, and beyond that they rely on the monasteries and temples for religious authority. But here in the West we need more than the Five Precepts. We need something like a lay Buddhist Vinaya.

I read recently that someone in a Zen group was having trouble bringing his practice into daily life, and he discussed it with one of the teachers. That teacher said that in Zen the practice comes into daily life after you have had a meditative breakthrough. This is essentially what I was told when I was practicing Zen.

But this is not how the Buddha taught. He taught the gradual path. It is rooted in virtue, and virtue requires that we constantly evaluate our actions of body, speech, and mind. This is how we progress along the path.

In Buddhism we use the word “practice.” I think this is a good word with

a few caveats. Buddhists do not practice the way that athletes do. Athletes practice, and this is separate from the real game. But for us as Buddhists, there is no difference. Practice and real life are the same things.

What follows is certainly not an exhaustive treatment of the complexities of lay life. I have chosen topics that I think are the most common, and the ones that I think are often misunderstood.

Money

Here in the West, and in the United States in particular, we have a toxic relationship to money. This is based on the false premise that having money and things will make us happy. Turn on the TV and you will see a litany of ads that tell you that if you buy something, then you will be a happier person.

My sister is a Certified Financial Planner, and she used to give seminars in which the first question that she asked was, "What is the most important thing in your life?" You would hear things like "my children" or "my family" or my "girl/boyfriend" or "my dog" or whatever it was. It was always something uniquely personal. On a rare occasion a guy might say "his car," but it was almost always about something very personal, especially a relationship.

She would then read back to them what they had all said, noting that no one said "money."

We get these constant messages about how important money and things are, but our own inner wisdom is smarter than that. We just have to listen to ourselves.

The Second Noble Truth is, of course, about "craving." The source of our suffering is craving. It is greed. And no, greed is not good. One of our most compelling drives is to acquire wealth. It is a futile strategy for happiness. In fact, it just feeds the cause of our suffering.

Having said that, poverty is no fun, either. I can say that from personal experience. I would never, ever glorify poverty. Of course, there are different kinds of poverty. Monks and nuns live in financial poverty. But I think most of them would say that they have rich lives. So that is a positive, intentional kind of poverty. It is a unique lifestyle that comes with certain tradeoffs, but one with which I think most monastics are quite happy.

Being a layperson, however, and never quite being able to pay the bills, or in even worse case situations where there is not enough to eat or proper clothing to wear or proper shelter is extremely oppressive. In the Buddhist tradition, it is generally accepted that in order for Buddhism to thrive, there must be prosperity and political stability. Buddhists vow not to harm or kill, and it is very hard to do that in societies that are poor, violent, and unstable.

It is also common for people to think of money and prosperity as being inherently evil. That is most definitely not in the Buddha's teachings.

Having money enables us to be generous. It enables us to support our families and ourselves. It enables us to support the Dharma. All of these things are positive. And if you have earned your money by the fruits of your own labor and you have done it through right livelihood, that is to your credit. If you have inherited it, that is your own good fortune. These are all positive actions in your life, and if they happen to you, you should be grateful. Good for you, and now the question is how to skillfully use it for the benefit of yourself and others.

In the *Anguttara Nikāya* there is a section called "Worthy Deeds" that says a lot about the benefits of wealth. First the Buddha said that wealth "acquired by energetic striving" enables us to support our families and ourselves:

(1) "Here, householder, with wealth acquired by energetic striving... righteously gained, the noble disciple makes himself happy and pleased and properly maintains

himself in happiness; he makes his parents happy and pleased and properly maintains them in happiness; he makes his wife and children, his slaves, workers, and servants happy and pleased and properly maintains them in happiness; he makes his friends and companions happy and pleased and properly maintains them in happiness. This is the first case of wealth that has gone to good use, that has been properly utilized and used for a worthy cause.” - [AN 4.61]

Next, wealth enables us to protect against unexpected events like earthquakes, fire, floods, thieves, and so on:

(2) “Again, with wealth acquired by energetic striving... righteously gained, the noble disciple makes provisions against the losses that might arise from fire, floods, kings, thieves, or displeasing heirs; he makes himself secure against them. This is the second case of wealth that has gone to good use... for a worthy cause.”

Third, wealth permits us to support relatives, guests, etc:

(3) “Again, with wealth acquired by energetic striving... righteously gained, the noble disciple makes the five oblations: to relatives, guests, ancestors, the king, and the deities. This is the third case of wealth that has gone to good use... for a worthy cause.”

And fourth, wealth permits us to support the noble disciples, the Saṅgha:

(4) “Again, with wealth acquired by energetic striving... righteously gained, the noble disciple establishes an uplifting offering of alms — an offering that is heavenly, resulting in happiness, conducive to heaven — to those

ascetics and brahmins who refrain from intoxication and heedlessness, who are settled in patience and mildness, who tame themselves, calm themselves, and train themselves for nibbāna. This is the fourth case of wealth that has gone to good use, that has been properly employed and used for a worthy cause.

“These, householder, are the four worthy deeds that the noble disciple undertakes with wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his arms, earned by the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained. When anyone exhausts wealth on anything apart from these four worthy deeds, that wealth is said to have gone to waste, to have been squandered, to have been used frivolously. But when anyone exhausts wealth on these four worthy deeds, that wealth is said to have gone to good use, to have been properly used, to have been utilized for a worthy cause.”

The very foundation of Buddhism is built on a structure that requires prosperity and wealth to survive.

I am sure that you noticed that this is wealth “acquired by energetic striving.” It is the fruit of your labor. Thus the Buddha not only praised wealth that is nobly attained, he also praised hard work and skill in acquiring it.

The only way to use wealth to guard against unexpected calamities is to manage your wealth, to save something for a rainy day. Thus the Buddha advised us to live sensibly, to distribute our wealth wisely, and to be financially responsible.

In the “Sigālovada Sutta: The Buddha’s Advice to Sigālaka” [DN 31] the Buddha went into more detail on how to manage your money. First, he told us not to squander it:

“And what six ways of squandering wealth are to be avoided? Young man, heedlessness caused by intoxication, roaming the streets at inappropriate times, habitual partying, compulsive gambling, bad companionship, and laziness are the six ways of squandering wealth.” - [DN 31.7]

Then he gave us some fourth century BCE financial planning advice:

*He should divide his wealth in four
(This will most advantage bring).
One part he may enjoy at will,
Two parts he should put to work,
The fourth part he should set aside
As reserve in times of need.*

- [DN 31.26]

So here is a summary:

1. Earn your money by diligent hard work, skill in your trade or business, and by right livelihood.
2. Use your wealth to support your family.
3. Use your wealth to protect against unexpected calamities.
4. Use your wealth to support others.
5. Use your wealth to support the Saṅgha of monks and nuns.
6. Do not squander your wealth through drunkenness, partying, gambling, bad friends (especially those who would take advantage of you), or laziness.
7. Divide your income into four parts. One is for you. Two are for reinvesting in your future. And the last one is saving for a rainy day.

You may need to divide your money up in a somewhat different way, but the point is to manage your money in a responsible way. This is not “buy now, pay later.” This is “save now, buy later.”

You should never feel like having wealth and prosperity is something of which to be ashamed. You can do a great deal of good through the ethical acquisition and skillful management of money. And there is a great deal of joy that can come from supporting yourself, your family, good people, and noble causes.

Work

Every layperson has to deal with the issue of how to earn a living. This is right livelihood in the Noble Eightfold Path.

The young man who was to become the Buddha grew up in a vibrant city of crafts, trades, and economic activity. H.W. Schumann gives us an idea of what it was like in the Buddha's hometown of Kapilavatthu:

Around the bazaar, not far from the better residential quarters, were concentrated the shops and workshops of the more luxurious and elegant trades, each in its own street: bankers and gold merchants, ivory carvers, clothiers and perfumers, brass and iron merchants, dealers in rice, condiments and sweetmeats. Every branch of industry, and every trade, was formed into a guild, which exercised extensive regulatory functions. The guild decided questions of production and sale, fixed prices, which even the local rāja accepted, took part in training of apprentices and even interfered in the domestic differences of members; if necessary the guild also looked after the widows of deceased members. Their pride showed itself in guild insignia which were carried on the occasion of public festivities, and also in the fact that the guild banned unworthy members from plying their trade – which often amounted to a sentence of beggary. All decisions were taken by a guild council, at the head of which was a guild chairman. Above him was the guild

president, who represented the interests of the particular branch of traded externally. He was usually purveyor to the court, and frequented the rāja's palace.

- [H.W. Schumann, *The Historical Buddha*]

Bankers had a particularly important place in Indian society:

The richest guild was that of the bankers. Their main source of income came from moneylending, for which there were fixed rates of interest...

The moneylenders, who belonged almost exclusively to the merchant [class], were not very high on the social scale, but in point of influence they were the leaders.

- [H.W. Schumann, *The Historical Buddha*]

The bankers funded trade expeditions, making the growth and expansion of the economy possible.

I mention all of this because in modern times bankers have taken quite a hit on their reputation. But as with so many things in life, what you do is not as important as how you do it. Bankers make it possible for people to buy houses and start businesses. They provide a secure place for our money. They provide vehicles for investment.

The most famous benefactor in Buddhist history and an archetype for generosity was Anāthapiṇḍika. Anāthapiṇḍika was, among other things, a banker.

The Buddha grew up in this time of great economic activity and expansion. His discourses are full of similes about trade and crafts:

“Just as a skilled potter or his apprentice might create and fashion out of well-prepared clay any shape of pot he

wished; or just as a skilled ivory-worker or his apprentice might create and fashion out of well-prepared ivory any ivory work of art he wished; or just as a skilled goldsmith or his apprentice might create and fashion out of well-prepared gold any gold work of art he wished; so too, I have proclaimed to my disciples the way to wield the various kinds of supernormal power..." - [MN 77.31]

"Bhikkhus, when a cowherd possesses eleven factors, he is capable of keeping and rearing a herd of cattle. What eleven? Here a cowherd has knowledge of form, he is skilled in characteristics, he picks out flies' eggs, he dresses wounds, he smokes out the sheds, he knows the ford, he knows what it is to have drunk, he knows the road, he is skilled in pastures, he does not milk dry, and he shows extra veneration to those bulls who are fathers and leaders of the herd. When a cowherd possesses these eleven factors, he is capable of keeping and rearing a herd of cattle." - [MN 33.15]

"When, bhikkhus, a carpenter or a carpenter's apprentice sees the impressions of his fingers and his thumb on the handle of his adze, he does not know: 'I have worn away so much of the adze handle today, so much yesterday, so much earlier'; but when it has worn away, he knows that it has worn away. So too, when a bhikkhu is intent on development, even though he does not know: 'I have worn away so much of the taints today, so much yesterday, so much earlier,' yet when they are worn away, he knows that they are worn away." - [AN 7.71]

*One here who has failed to obtain
the fixed course of the good Dhamma,*

*will come to regret it for a long time
like a merchant who has missed a profit.*

- [AN 8.29]

The Buddha's first two lay disciples were Tapussa and Bhallika. They were merchants.

These many similes show the respect that the Buddha had for business people like bankers and merchants and people who were skilled in crafts like goldsmithing, weaving, ivory carving, and so on. The Buddha encouraged hard work, learning skill in trade, and acquiring wealth through right livelihood. That is *right* livelihood. It is earning a living that is in harmony with the precepts.

Now, as we fast forward in time to the present, lay people have to face these same challenges. How do we earn a living? How do we support our families and ourselves?

Many people think that economic activity is bad. Devoting yourself to a profession or career or trade or a skill has many benefits. And I think that the most important thing to understand is that the discipline that you get from working for many years at a job applies to your Dharma practice.

It takes time to master a complex skill, and meditation and the Dharma are certainly that. There are milestones of mastery at five years and ten years of learning a complex skill. In Buddhism, from the time of the Buddha, novice monks were expected to stay with their Dharma teachers and preceptors for five years. This correlates to the modern understanding. And it takes ten years for a monk to become a senior monk, a Bhante or an Ajahn. This also correlates to our modern understanding. So there is a close parallel between the amount of time that a Buddhist monk or nun needs to master the Dharma, and the amount of time that it takes to master a trade. [Malcom Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*]

All these activities fall under the general category of creative problem

solving and work discipline. You may not think about meditation and Dharma study in that way, but it is. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that you cannot put into a book all the things that can happen in a human mind. The book would be so enormous that it would be unusable.

[Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "[Ingenuity](#)", 11-Aug-2006] You have a unique mind. Dharma teachers can head you in a certain direction, but ultimately there are times when you have to use your own problem-solving skills to progress as a meditator.

For a layperson, then, someone who needs to support him/herself and also to progress in the Dharma, mastering a skill will support both of those activities. When you are younger, you may need to devote more time to developing a career. But this is time well spent. This is the discipline part of the Dharma and discipline:

And the Lord said to Ānanda: "Ānanda, it may be that you will think: 'The Teacher's instruction has ceased, now we have no teacher!' It should not be seen like this, Ānanda, for what I have taught and explained to you as Dhamma and discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher." - [DN 16.6.1]

But it is not just young people who need to develop skill in work. Some people seem to know from the time they are very young what they want to do, what they are compelled to do. I always admired people like that, but I was not like that. I was in my late 20's before I found a career, and, frankly, I struggled for a long time. I tried many different things, and I was pretty bad at some of them. Robert Frost did not write a poem until he was 40. My mother started a new career at the age of 60 as a school psychologist. There is no fixed formula.

This is all part of your life's kōan, as the Zen folks would say. But I think that if you are a layperson, then you should not miss the opportunity to develop a career, whatever that is and whenever it happens. You do not have to be a rocket scientist. I have a friend who loves being a waitress. There are no bonus points for having a job that sounds good. It is better

to be a skilled mother than a bad CEO, lawyer, or teacher.

I will make some final capping points on this topic. First of all, you should never use the Dharma as a way to earn a living. The Dharma professionals are monks and nuns. If you want to devote your life to the Dharma, then you should ordain. This does not mean that lay people cannot be Dharma teachers. But it does mean that if you want to be a lay Dharma teacher, then you need a way to support yourself. You need a day job.

In medieval China many lay Buddhists spent their lives working at a career, living by the precepts, and managing their money in a responsible way. This let them retire early and devote their remaining years to practicing the Dharma. This is a very good model for modern, lay Buddhists.

Caring for Our Homes

Once when I'd just arrived in Bangkok on some visa business, I was in the midst of cleaning my room, sweeping it, wiping it down. A Western monk who'd just returned from Burma knew that I might be there, so he came around and sure enough I had just come in. But as soon as he saw me wiping down the floor, he said, "You Thai monks! All you do is spend your time cleaning up. Over in Burma, we have other people who do that for us." And as you looked at the quality of his meditation, you could see that he was used to having other people doing things for him. His meditation had gotten slack and sloppy as well.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Meditations* 4]

In my years as a software engineer I was involved in a lot of hiring. One thing that I noticed over time is that the way someone does one thing is

pretty much the way they do everything. If someone had a sloppy resume or a messy office, that was probably the kind of work they did. And in the course of the interview process, I tried to get the applicant to perform some task, even if that task did not appear to have anything to do with the job.

In order to bring the practice into your daily life you, must apply it to everything. It is how you get up in the morning. It is how you make your bed. It is how you treat the checkout person at the grocery store:

At some point in the transformative process, you recognize that there's no difference between who you are in the pew or on the aikido mat, and who you are in the grocery store, on the freeway, or at your office. The same mindful attention brought to the placement of your legs in a difficult yoga pose can be brought to a challenging conversation with your child. The same peace and joy brought to a beloved community of fellow practitioners can be brought to a PTA meeting. The same reverence that arises from spending three days in the wilderness on a vision quest can be brought to the clouds in the sky and the spindly trees in the mall parking lot.

- [Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, Cassandra Vieten, Tina Amorok, *The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life*]

This applies most certainly to your home. Your home may be a single room, a small apartment, or a large house with many rooms. When you are at a meditation retreat center it is a small room. When you are hiking it is your tent.

Wherever it is, this is a sacred space. If you have gone on a retreat or been to a temple or Dharma center, then you know that the custom is to leave your shoes at the door. This is an ancient Asian tradition. It probably comes from a time when shoes and sandals were pretty dirty

things, so you took them off before coming indoors.

I was at a meditation center once where a woman was complaining about this custom. She thought it was some quaint, archaic, Asian holdover. But all I could think of was how it was first explained to me. "In Japan," I was told, "Taking your shoes off symbolizes leaving the dirt of the world outside."

When we come home and take our shoes off and leave them at the door, it is a way of leaving behind whatever we just left. That might be our job or shopping or yard work. We take our shoes off and leave the dirt of the world outside. We enter our home as a sacred space. We come into the present moment, leaving behind whatever just happened. A home or a meditation hall is a sanctuary. It is a safe harbor.

Orthodox Jews have a custom that speaks to these same values. They affix a "Mezuzah" to the door, or just inside the doorway. A Mezuzah is a piece of parchment with sacred verses written on it. When you come home, you touch it as a sacred act.

Tibetan Buddhists have a similar tradition. They mount a prayer wheel to the door or just inside the door. When they come home they spin the wheel, thus "saying their prayers." These are all mindfulness practices. They bring us into the present moment. They put our lives back into perspective if we have forgotten what that is before we walked through the door.

Given that your home is a sacred space, it is worth treating it as such. We keep it neat and clean. The beds are made. The dishes are done. The floors are clean. The bills are paid. We treat people to whom we owe money as if the money were owed to us. This is being responsible and mindful and kind and courteous.

Everything that we have come with a cost. Something on our planet was disrupted. That is what makes what we have sacred. It is not because any of these things have inherent value or meaning. They don't. But what we have was taken from somewhere. It probably disturbed some animal's

habitat. There is nothing terrible about that. Life feeds on life. That is how the system works. But if we take more than we need, and then do not care for what we have taken, then we just create more and more disruption. We honor our planet and its inhabitants by treating what we have with care and respect.

Caring for Our Bodies

What applies to our homes also applies to our bodies. On one hand, we do not want to self-identify with our bodies. The body is the body, as the Buddha said, "in and of itself." It is not "me." It is just the body.

On the other hand, the body is where we live during this lifetime. Our minds and bodies are interdependent. A healthy body enables us to practice the Dharma. It enables us to work and go through the normal activities of life.

The proper way to think about the body is akin to the way a cavalryman relates to his horse. A cavalryman is completely dependent on his horse for his very life. So he cares for the horse. He feeds it and waters it and brushes it and exercises it. He has a very unique relationship with his horse. But he never thinks of the horse as "myself."

Some people are born with vibrant, healthy bodies. Some people are born with bodies that are not as healthy. Their bodies may even fail them in some way. Whatever your situation, that is, as the saying goes, the hand that you are dealt. Now it is up to you to play that hand as best you can.

Some years ago I did Tai Chi, and the instructor told us that having a naturally healthy body was considered something of a liability in Tai Chi. "Naturally healthy people," he said, "tend to take their bodies for granted." You see this in athletes who by the time they are in their 40's and 50's have all sorts of problems like arthritis and heart conditions and so forth because they thought they were indestructible.

I have also seen cases where people who have been strong and healthy

their whole lives develop a medical condition. It might be something serious like cancer. And they seem to have a much more difficult time dealing with the fact that they are sick and dying than people who have had to struggle with their health their whole lives.

If you are naturally strong and athletic, that is wonderful. Good for you. And if you handle that properly, you may have an advantage in doing intensive Dharma practice or simply doing things with your life that not everyone can do. I am not trying to condemn good health. This is more making a point about working with what you have, and if your health is not so great, that is not necessarily a disadvantage. The question is, "What do you do with that?"

I love this story and I have not had a chance to tell it anywhere else, so this seems like a good place for it. This is actually from the Taoist tradition. It is called "[Maybe](#)."

There was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically.

"Maybe," the farmer replied. The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed.

"Maybe," replied the old man. The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune.

"Maybe," answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg

was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out.

"Maybe," said the farmer.

If you are young and athletic and healthy, take good care of your body. If you are old and sick and dying, take good care of your body. Whatever your situation is, take care of your body. Just do not become attached to it. The body will fail. There will be a time to let go of it.

Buddhism is in a sense naturally conservative, at least when it comes to personal lifestyle, and the body is a good example of that. You want to take care of your body in the same way that you care for your home. In the Vinaya there are rules about keeping the body clean. Monastics, of course, shave their heads. You do not have to do that, but you should keep your hair properly cut. Your clothing should be simple and conservative.

My brother-in-law used to spend a lot of time in Afghanistan. When he was there, he stayed in Kabul with a relatively wealthy family. When the women in the family were in the family compound, they dressed however they pleased. However, when they went outside, in public, they wore burkas.

This was not just because it was the custom. These Muslim women thought it curious that Western women want to advertise their bodies in such a public and suggestive way. In Afghanistan the understanding was that women wearing burkas was a form of protection that went back to the time of Genghis Khan. When the Mongols invaded Muslim countries there was a lot of rape, so the women started wearing burkas to hide whatever physical attributes they had. Since it was hard to tell which women were attractive and which ones were not, the burka acted as something of a deterrent.

How much clothing you have is another issue. I know that this is an

easier issue for men than women. I more or less follow the monastic rule, which is to have three changes of clothes. In the winter, for example, I wear sweatshirts. I have three of them. I have three pairs of dungarees, and so on. Of course, I do not work in an office, so I can do that.

But even for women there is a way to dress that is simple, professional, and stylish. My sister once had a job where she traveled almost everywhere in the world, and she could go anyplace for any length of time with two carry-on bags. She had a system of combining blouses and skirts and pants and so on.

Buddhists traditionally do not overdo “adornments,” jewelry and such. On Uposatha days, people do not wear adornments to the temple. They also do not use perfume. Perfume can be a real problem in temples and Dharma halls because many people are allergic to it.

I am sure that some of you will resist these types of lifestyle choices, and that is fine. Wearing jewelry and using perfume does not make you a bad person. But over time, perhaps, you can question why you need to bring such attention to yourself. If you do wear jewelry, keep it simple. My daughter is a lovely young woman, and I like buying jewelry for her. In the southwestern U.S. where I live, there are many wonderful Native American artisans. But her tastes are simple and elegant. I think that is keeping in the spirit of Buddhist simplicity.

Taking Care of Our Minds

Our mind is like a television set with thousands of channels, and the channel we switch on is the channel we are at that moment. When we turn on anger, we are anger. When we turn on peace and joy, we are peace and joy. We have the ability to select the channel. We are what we choose to be. We can select any channel of the mind. Buddha (awakened mind) is a channel, Māra (confusion, compulsion, and delusion) is a channel,

remembering is a channel, forgetting is a channel, calm is a channel, agitation is a channel. Changing from one state of being to another is as simple as the change from a channel showing a film to a channel playing music.

There are people who cannot tolerate peace and quiet, who are afraid of facing themselves, so they turn on the television in order to be preoccupied with it for a whole evening. In contemporary culture, people rarely like to be with themselves, and they frequently seek forgetfulness - downtown at the theater or other places of amusement. People rarely like to look deeply and compassionately at themselves.

Young people in American watch television more than five hours per day, and they also have all sorts of electronic games to occupy them. Where will a culture in which people do not have the chance to face themselves or form real relationships with others lead us?

There are many interesting, instructive programs on television, and we can use the TV guide to select programs which encourage mindfulness. We should decide to watch only the programs we have selected and avoid becoming a victim of the television.

- [Thich Nhat Hanh, "[Turning On The Television: Where Is Your Mind?](#)"]

When we take care of our bodies, we want to put good things into it and avoid putting poison into it. The same is true for the mind.

Many years ago – and this was before the Internet – my teacher suggested that I avoid watching the news for a year. That was a very instructive practice. First of all, it sensitized me to how much agitation is

caused by watching the news. Second, I found that even without watching or listening to the news, I always somehow knew what was going on. This shows how pervasive the news is in our culture.

This practice is to pay attention to what comes in through the sense doors and see what effect that has on the mind. This is especially true for television, radio, the Internet, movies, etc.

Certain forms of entertainment are particularly toxic. The news is one. Violent television programs and movies are another. Loud, aggressive music is as well. Commercials are particularly agitating. Sometimes even when the television program itself is not objectionable, the bombardment of the mind by advertising is.

We are so used to having the media invade our lives that we do not have any idea how much it affects us. I knew a family once that as soon as they woke up in the morning, they turned on the television. And the last thing they did before going to bed at night was to turn it off. They didn't even realize what that was doing to the environment in their household. But for someone who walked into the house and then left, it was abundantly apparent.

This causes a sort of sensory media addiction. I went to an opera recently where a young woman in front of me started texting halfway through the second act. You may have had this happen to you at the movies. People can't even go a couple of hours without looking at their cell phones.

We have even learned to rationalize this addictive behavior. People call it "multitasking," as if that is a good thing. I have had young people say that their generation is better at multitasking than older people.

Well, first of all, the human brain does not evolve in 20 years. It takes thousands and thousands of years, so the brain of a 60-year-old and the brain of a 20-year-old are not biologically different.

There is also a basic misunderstanding of what multitasking means. People who use this word are, in fact, correct that this describes what the

brain is doing. But that is not what they mean. What they think they are describing is “multiprocessing.” Multiprocessing is when more than one thing is going on at the same time. There are computers that do this. They have more than one processor, and tasks can be divided up and assigned to different processors. A simple example is copying a file. One processor can read the input file while another writes the output file. They have to be synchronized, of course, but basically two sets of operations are going on simultaneously.

This is not, however, how the human brain works. The human brain can only do one thing at a time. This is the correct meaning of “multitasking.” One task executes, and then it is interrupted by another task. In order for the second task to execute, the state of the first task must be stored, the context is switched to the state of the second task, and then the second task executes. There is an inherent inefficiency in this operation. Nothing of value happens during the task switch.

So when the human brain multitasks, it is just doing one thing at a time, and it has to pause to change tasks. This is extremely agitating to the mind.

Our cultivation of concentration is the opposite of this. We try to get the mind to stay on one task. That task is usually watching the breath. Watching the breath helps to calm the mind and to get it into a state of calm, tranquility, serenity, and stillness. It is a state of peace and happiness. People who are jumping back and forth between watching a movie, texting, and surfing the Internet are not going to experience this kind of joy and happiness. They are very likely to become angry and reactive and insensitive to their actions. And you certainly would not want someone doing brain surgery on you who is surfing the Internet and texting.

There are a lot of lingering effects to this media bombardment. I went on a meditation retreat once where after several days the teacher asked how many people had a song running through their heads. About half the people raised their hands. So even after several days of complete silence,

the mind was not cleansed of this media noise.

It does not have to be all bad. Some movies and TV programs are soothing and inspirational. But it is about becoming sensitive to how it affects our minds. When you get an email and see that it is about politics or something like that, what is the upside to even reading it? It is worth asking the question.

Monks and nuns are forbidden from watching any form of entertainment. A friend of mine told me a story about being in Thailand with a group of monks, and there was a festival going on in the village. She said it was kind of charming to see the lengths to which they went to avoid it. So that is the extreme case.

As lay people we are probably not going to avoid entertainment of any kind. But start by seeing how dependent our minds are for this kind of stimulation. See how much agitation it causes. You may even notice how the last thing you see on TV at night stays with you all night and into your morning meditation. Can you simply turn off the radio or TV? Can you drive without having the radio on? When you watch the news is there even any value in that? What is the benefit? Does it make you a happier more skillful and contented person, or is it just noise? Can you go even a day without being on the Internet or watching television?

Eating

“Bhikkhus, you should train thus: ‘We will be moderate in eating. Reflecting wisely, we will take food neither for amusement nor for intoxication nor for the sake of physical beauty and attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of this body, for ending discomfort, and for assisting the holy life, considering: “Thus I shall terminate old feelings without arousing new feelings and I shall be healthy and blameless and shall live in comfort.”’ - [MN 39.9]

Perhaps the most widespread addiction in this country is food. This addiction leads to obesity, diabetes, joint problems, and so on. I am sure you know all about this, so I am not going to make a big case here for the problems associated with over-eating.

One of the things that we want to cultivate in our Buddhist practice is a responsible relationship to food. We need to eat, of course. Eating properly can lead to good health, and that good health can help us practice the Dharma. Eating a healthy diet and exercising and caring for our bodies can help us to live longer, more productive lives.

On the other hand, food is probably the most obvious way in which we can see how craving creates suffering. If we eat something we don't like, we suffer. If we cannot get what we want to eat, we suffer. Then we eat something we like but we eat too much, and we suffer.

If, however, we are happy with whatever we have, then we do not suffer. We can eat something we like and simply enjoy it. If we eat something we do not like, we can still be grateful for what we have, appreciating that we do not have to go hungry. We can even fast and be satisfied with that. In all these cases there is no stress, and there is no suffering.

What We Eat

Today, 150 billion land animals and 1.5 trillion sea animals are killed for our consumption. We treat them like rats and vermin and cockroaches to be eliminated. This would be called genocide or dehumanization if they were human beings.

We even go one step further with animals: we instrumentalize them. They become objects. They become the pig industry, sausage or meat factories. Ethically you cannot imagine progressing toward a more altruistic or more compassionate society while behaving

like this.

Eating meat reveals another selfishness in terms of other fellow human beings. Rich countries consume the most meat: about 200 kilos per year per inhabitant in the USA, compared to about 3 kilos in India. The more the GDP of a country increases, usually so does the amount of meat consumption.

In order to produce one kilo of meat, you need ten kilos of vegetable proteins. This is at a cost to the poorest section of humanity. With two acres of land, you can feed fifty vegetarians or two meat eaters. The 775 million tons of soy and corn that are used for industrial farming could be used for feeding people who are in need.

- [Matthieu Ricard, "[Why I am a Vegetarian](#)"]

As with everything else that we own, there is a cost associated with what we eat. The environmental cost of eating meat is enormous, and as countries like China and India become more prosperous, the planet cannot sustain this level of consumption.

There are three main arguments for becoming a vegetarian:

1. It is usually healthier.
2. It uses fewer of the planet's resources.
3. It reduces the number of animals that are raised in often brutal conditions and then mercilessly killed.

All living things want to live. When I lived in Vermont, one of my favorite hikes was up a mountain called Camel's Hump. The summit of Camel's Hump is arctic tundra, and I was always amazed at the scrawny little trees that insisted on growing there.

As to health, there are people who need meat in their diets. The Dalai

Lama happens to be one of them. That is a case where meat is more of a medicine than food. That is a somewhat different case.

You will hear that vegetarian diets do not provide enough protein, but that is a myth. In fact, doctors consider vegetable sources of protein superior to meat:

Proteins can come from multiple sources. Typically people think of red meats, dairy and eggs. However animal proteins are also high in cholesterol and have been shown to increase risks of cancer with increasing consumption.

High cholesterol has been linked to heart disease and stroke which are two of the biggest killers in America. Soy protein is also a high-quality source of protein that lacks the risks associated with animal proteins. Other sources of plantar proteins include beans, brown rice and nuts.

Most plant proteins lack one of the essential amino acids, but when eating a balanced diet of multiple proteins sources individuals can obtain all of the essential amino acids that they need.

- [Christopher Burton, "[Protein Requirements for Athletes](#)",
Lessons from Physiatriy]

(Physiatriy is the field of medicine that deals with healing.)

I became a vegetarian almost by accident. My health was very poor at the time, and my cholesterol was high. I had had chest pain for a couple of years. I was only 39 years old, but I knew that I was headed for a heart attack. So I changed my diet and I started running. One of the things that I changed in my diet was to drastically reduce how much meat that I ate.

Within six months I found that I had lost my taste for meat. Meats like

beef and bacon are grotesquely greasy and fatty. They no longer had any appeal to me. In fact, the mere thought of bacon, which has been turned into a sort of food opioid, makes me feel slightly nauseated. Once I was mistakenly given pork fried rice, and the pork tasted like salted cardboard to me. On another occasion, I mistakenly ate some chicken, and that did not taste like it had any flavor at all.

I had a similar experience with sugar. I used to love cake and ice cream. But I have dental problems, and I found out that by cutting sugar out of my diet, my teeth and gums improved. But I also discovered that I lost my taste for sugar. When I ate cake and ice cream, they did not taste good to me anymore.

These experiences made me wonder whether we even really taste our food. Our conditions and habits may be so ingrained that we think we taste one thing, and all that is happening is that our brains are manufacturing the experience. Accomplished meditators know how the brain takes a sensory input and fabricates a mental formation from that. When you can break those experiences down, they often take on a different form. Working with pain is like that, where you start looking deeply into the complex process of feelings that the mind turns into "pain." There is a lot going on there, and not all of it is unpleasant.

A few years ago a friend of mine told me that she was worried about her husband's diet. She was trying to get him to try some of the soy meat substitutes. He aggressively resisted that idea, saying that he had never eaten anything made from soy that "did not make him want to vomit."

I suggested a particular brand of soy breakfast sausage, and she made it for him without telling him what it was. He uncharacteristically went out of his way to tell her how much he liked it!

I had another similar experience with someone who I told about how good lentils are for you. He went on a rampage about how much he hates lentils. Now in India, they hardly ever eat a meal without lentils, and the Indians are really expert at turning lentils into wonderful dishes. The

most popular form is called “dal.” They hardly ever have a meal without it. Every section of India and every family has its own recipe. I am pretty sure that if I served him dal, he would enjoy it. He probably would not even know it was made from lentils. In India they also make a wonderful, paper-thin crepe called a “dosa.” It, too, is made from lentils, although you would never know that from eating it.

Do the planet and yourself and the animals a favor. If you are not a vegetarian, try and start working yourself in that direction. And pay attention to how the mind responds to food. What you think you are experiencing and what you are actually experiencing are often very different things.

How We Eat

I know a number of self-described foodies. They can talk for hours and hours and hours about food. And one thing that I noticed about all of them is how unmindfully they eat. They shovel the food in their mouths at such a prodigious rate that I cannot believe that their taste buds get anything but a passing acquaintance with what is flying by them.

I would think that if you enjoy something, then you would not be in such a hurry to end the experience. If you are enjoying a nice hot bath, you would not leap out of the tub. But that seems to be how many people eat.

This does not mean that you cannot enjoy a nice meal. In fact, if you eat mindfully you will really enjoy it, and not in some contrived way. It won't be an experience that your mind manufactures. You will enjoy eating more, not less.

Diet programs often teach habits that are conducive to mindful eating. If you put a spoonful of food into your mouth and then put the spoon down while you chew, that is good mindfulness practice. Then you pick up the spoon when you are done chewing, and repeat as necessary. You will eat less, and I think that you will enjoy it more.

How Much We Eat

When my children were young they had a friend who spent a year in Brazil. When she came back to the United States, her first observation was how much people eat here. Americans eat an enormous amount of food, and most of it is bad for them.

This is not surprising. The next time that you watch television, note how many commercials are for food. And it is not good food. It isn't broccoli, whole wheat bread, and brown rice. It's junk. It is hamburgers and Twinkies. And we get these messages drummed into our heads every hour that we have the TV on.

Imagine if your local heroin dealer was doing that. That is basically what it is. It is advertising that is telling us to put poison into our bodies.

I knew a Buddhist monk who had reached his ten-year anniversary as a fully ordained monk. As a gift he was given a month's retreat, and he was trying to decide how he would conduct it, what the rules would be. Two of his rules were very simple: 1) when you are done sleeping, get up, and 2) when you have had enough food, stop eating.

That sounds so simple, but I started working with those two rules, and it is interesting how often I found that I had eaten enough but wanted to keep eating. Once the desire for food kicks in, it does not stop just because you have eaten enough. The craving for food continues. You still want more.

This is a wonderful way to practice. Just as we work with feelings on the cushion, now we can see feelings at work in the eating process. There is a feeling of pleasure, and this gives rise to craving. By watching what the mind does with this, we can stop the craving and stop eating at a more appropriate point.

Larry Rosenberg says that in yoga they teach you to eat until your stomach is 2/3 full. Then stop. You have eaten enough. That is another

good mindfulness practice. Before he told me this, I never had any idea how full my stomach was. The stomach is a muscle, and because it is a muscle, you can make it stretch. This is one way that our bodies make it possible to over-eat. This is probably a survival mechanism from times when food sources were unreliable. But now it is making us fat and unhealthy.

Over-eating is another example of how we abuse our use of resources. Not only do we eat the wrong things, incurring the environmental cost that comes with that, we make it worse by eating too much.

The Buddha talked often about a proper relationship to food. Here is a conversation between the Buddha and King Pasenadi:

At Sāvattthī. Now on that occasion King Pasenadi of Kosala had eaten a bucket measure of rice and curries. Then, while still full, huffing and puffing, the king approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and sat down to one side.

Then the Blessed One, having understood that King Pasenadi was full and was huffing and puffing, on that occasion recited this verse:

*“When a man is always mindful,
Knowing moderation in the food he eats,
His ailments then diminish:
He ages slowly, guarding his life.”*

Now on that occasion the brahmin youth Sudassana was standing behind King Pasenadi of Kosala. The King then addressed him thus: “Come now, dear Sudassana, learn this verse from the Blessed One and recite it to me whenever I am taking my meal. I will then present you daily with a hundred kahāpaṇas as a perpetual grant.”

“Yes, sire,” the brahmin youth Sudassana replied. Having learned this verse from the Blessed One, whenever King Pasenadi was taking his meal the brahmin youth Sudassana recited:

*“When a man is always mindful,
Knowing moderation in the food he eats,
His ailments then diminish:
He ages slowly, guarding his life.”*

Then King Pasenadi of Kosala gradually reduced his intake of food to at most a pint-pot measure of boiled rice. At a later time, when his body had become quite slim, King Pasenadi of Kosala stroked his limbs with his hand and on that occasion uttered this inspired utterance: “The Blessed One showed compassion towards me in regard to both kinds of good — the good pertaining to the present life and that pertaining to the future life.” - [SN 3.13]

Even in the fifth century BCE the Buddha had a good weight-loss program.

Fasting

In Thich Nhat Hanh’s sangha they practice fasting. This can be a very useful way to learn about your relationship to food.

Throughout most of human history, people did not eat regularly scheduled meals. They might not eat every day. As a result, our bodies evolved to handle periods of eating and periods of non-eating. One reason that we have an obesity problem today is that our bodies are very good at storing fat. Our bodies can even take non-fat and turn it into fat.

All animals fast in times of stress and illness. You may have been very

sick at some time and lost your appetite. This is a natural way for the body to rest and conserve energy. Processing food in your body uses a lot of energy, which is why you often feel so tired after eating.

There's a tendency for us to think that our happiness should be searched for in the future, by doing something. Even our health should be "searched for" by doing something. But we don't know that not doing anything may be the key to restoring our health. Many of us are obsessed by the idea that we have to get more nutrients. We buy vitamins, "one-a-day," and we take one pill every morning and things like that. Many of us are motivated by that kind of desire. Not many of us are aware that we have a reserve in our body that we can use for up to three or four weeks without eating. Those of us who practice fasting and drinking only water, can go for many weeks and we don't have to stop the daily things. We can still go to sitting meditation, walking meditation, cleaning in the kitchen, in the bathroom, participating in Dharma talks. We can do that many weeks without eating. In the process, we enjoy doing these things. And the toxins we have, from the third day on, begin to get out because we are drinking a lot of water, we are practicing a lot of walking meditation and deep breathing and we clean our bodies, so the toxins can get out. And after three weeks, you look much better — even if you don't eat anything. Your skin, the expression on your face, your smile — you may look like a new person. That is not because you take a lot of vitamins, or eat a lot of nutrients, it is because you don't eat anything. You allow your body to rest.

- [Thich Nhat Hanh, "[Dharma Talk at Plum Village](#)", 4-Aug-2013]

In the monastic Saṅgha, fasting sometimes happens naturally because monks and nuns cannot always get alms-food. They treat a day without food as just a normal part of life. In the Buddha's discourses, when the Buddha met monks on the road, he will often ask them if they are able to get sufficient alms-food:

Then all three went to meet the Blessed One. One took his bowl and outer robe, one prepared a seat, and one set out water for washing the feet. The Blessed One sat down on the seat made ready and washed his feet. Then those three venerable ones paid homage to the Blessed One and sat down at one side. When they were seated, the Blessed One said to them: "I hope you are all keeping well, Anuruddha, I hope you are all comfortable, I hope you are not having any trouble getting alms-food."

"We are keeping well, Blessed One, we are comfortable, and we are not having any trouble getting alms-food." - [MN 31.5]

We have preconceived ideas about so many things and eating is one of them. When I was growing up I was told that you have to eat three times a day. But even before I became a Buddhist I discovered that my body works best when I eat one main meal per day, and then have one or two light meals – almost more like snacks – per day.

I also discovered that meditating after I eat a large meal just makes me sleepy. Lama Surya Das calls the meditation sessions that happen right after lunch the "siesta sessions." So on retreat, in particular, I learned to eat smaller meals. When I meditate at home in the morning I do not eat beforehand. This is one way to learn about our relationship to food. Notice what your energy levels are after eating. If you feel sluggish, you have eaten too much.

Fasting can be very helpful if you begin to feel sick. You have probably

had this happen. You are not yet sick, but you can feel an illness coming on. If you stop eating immediately, you have a very good chance of not getting sick. I have about a 90% success rate with this technique. You will probably feel a little queasy for a day, and then you will be fine.

Another thing you can learn when you fast is that it is not that big of a deal. In fact, if you stay busy during the day, you may forget that you have not eaten. The first day is usually the hardest. On the first day of a fast I drink green tea, which is an appetite suppressant.

By the second or third day you may find that it is actually hard to start eating again. And when you do start to eat again remember that your body will be in a delicate state, especially your stomach. Eat things that are easy on your digestive system when you break a fast.

Obviously, if you have a health condition you must approach this practice with care. But fasting can help us lose our preconceived notions about eating, about what we think we need.

When you are addicted to something, in order to stop the addiction you must convince yourself that you don't want or need it. Fasting can help us do that with food.

Consumption

“Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu lives in some jungle thicket. While he is living there his unestablished mindfulness becomes established, his unconcentrated mind becomes concentrated, his undestroyed taints come to destruction, he attains the unattained supreme security from bondage; and also the requisites of life that should be obtained by one gone forth — robes, alms-food, resting place, and medicinal requisites — are easy to come by. The bhikkhu should consider thus: ‘I am living in this jungle thicket. While I am living here my unestablished

mindfulness has become established... I have attained the unattained supreme security from bondage; and also the requisites of life... are easy to come by.' That bhikkhu should continue living in that jungle thicket as long as life lasts; he should not depart." - [MN 17.6]

The issue of consumption has come up a number of times by inference, but I want to address it directly.

Americans make up 5% of the world's population but consume 24% of its resources. And as the American lifestyle gets exported to growing economies like China and India, the planet cannot sustain this level of consumption.

Even 2400 years ago the Buddha was sensitive to what we take from the environment. Monastics were only allowed the barest minimum of possessions: three robes, an alms bowl, a waistband, a razor, a sewing kit and a water strainer. These days they commonly have other items like a toothbrush, toothpaste, clock, and so forth, but the list is still quite Spartan. If you go on a meditation retreat, you will get a taste of the simplicity of the life of a monk or nun.

There is something quite liberating about such a simple life. There is very little to take care of, to fix, maintain, keep clean, and so on. I heard a story once about a forest monk. Forest monks live a particularly simple life. He visited a monk in Sri Lanka who lived in one of the big monasteries there. At one point, the forest monk said to the monastery monk, "Why don't you come spend some time with me at my monastery." The monastery monk agreed, and he started heading back to his monastery to gather his things. Meanwhile, the forest monk started heading down the road. "Where are you going?!" yelled the monastery monk. It turned out that since the forest monk carried everything with him, if he wanted to go somewhere, he simply went, whereas the monastery monk had all kinds of possessions, so he had to go pack.

I am guessing that for most lay people, life is not this simple. Somewhere

between the lifestyle of a forest monk and the lifestyle of an oil tycoon, there is a happy meeting point.

As with eating, no one can tell you what that is. You will have to work on that as an ongoing project. But one thing to consider is this. It has become common to believe that we can continue to consume as much as we do but replace what we consume with more environmentally responsible, green products. And I think that is a myth and a rationalization.

First of all, we hardly ever know the environmental cost of something we buy. Take something simple like laundry detergent. I always buy the environmentally friendly, biodegradable laundry detergent. That is partly because I have a septic system. But I do not know how large a carbon footprint the manufacturing of that detergent makes. Because it is shipped from far away, it may even have a larger carbon footprint than the cheaper, non-biodegradable detergent.

There are some other interesting cases. I talked to a mechanical engineer once who said that the carbon footprint of manufacturing and shipping solar panels is actually greater than more traditional forms of producing electricity. I do not know if that is true, but it is worth considering. Of course, solar power is renewable, sort of, but even solar panels wear out and have to be replaced.

These are complicated issues, and there has only been a limited amount of analysis and study on them. This is all the more reason to concentrate on how much we consume, not just to think that we can continue our high rates of consumption but use green products instead.

A great deal of what we consume comes from our habitual patterns, our impulses, compulsions, and our need to feed. Reducing our consumption is a mindfulness practice. How much do we really need? Everyone needs to answer that question for him/herself. But the opposite of mindfulness is mindlessness. We must train ourselves to consume carefully, responsibly, and mindfully.

Monks and nuns have very simple requisites. They have only what is

necessary for a minimal material existence. For lay people, this is not as easy. We each have to determine what the bare, essential requisites are for us. It is part of our life's work.

Sex

“Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause, sensual pleasures as the source, sensual pleasures as the basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures, kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmins with brahmins, householders with householders; mother quarrels with son, son with mother, father with son, son with father; brother quarrels with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. And here in their quarrels, brawls, and disputes they attack each other with fists, clods, sticks, or knives, whereby they incur death or deadly suffering. Now this too is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering here and now... the cause being simply sensual pleasures.” - [MN 13.11]

(The Pāli word for “sensual” is the same word that is used for “sexual.”)

The Second Noble Truth says that the cause of our dukkha – our suffering and stress – is craving, and there is no stronger force for craving than sexual desire.

Pick up one of the tabloid newspapers sometime and look at the violence that surrounds sexual desire. Mothers kill their children to please a boyfriend. Men kill their women lovers, and women kill their male lovers. Men kill their male lovers, and women kill their women lovers. People kill from jealousy. People kill from the pain of broken relationships. Then there is the violence of sexual assault.

Even people who do not commit these obvious acts of violence have often been terribly hurt by an unhappy romance. Most people have had

that experience.

Sexual desire is so potent that even people who attain stream-entry are not rid of it. In fact, it is not until the second-to-last stage of awakening, non-returning, that we are finally free from sexual desire. This powerful form of desire must be treated with care and respect.

Monks and nuns are celibate. That is one way to deal with sexual desire, to avoid it entirely. That, by the way, is not to say that no monk or nun has ever had sex. The Vinaya is full of stories of monks and nuns who found ways to skirt the rules. There is even a story about a monk who lived with a female monkey and had sex with her. There is a great deal of attention paid to sex in the Vinaya, which is pretty curious considering that the rule about sex is “don’t do it.” That would seem pretty clear. So even for monastics the issue of sexual desire is a serious problem.

Lay people can, of course, also choose celibacy. This usually gets easier as you get older. You might consider this choice. It can be a little hard sometimes to explain this choice to others because most people think that sex is a necessity. Of course it is not, but that is the general view.

I saw a comedian once who was talking about drugs like Viagra. He said that as he got older, he was actually looking forward to being free from “all that pressure.” Drugs like Viagra are not a solution. They simply feed a problem. It is a case of inventing a disease, and then creating a profitable solution to the disease. There are even reports that say that drugs like Viagra increase the divorce rate. From the standpoint of the Second Noble Truth, it is quite unskillful.

So celibacy is one approach, and I put it out there because very few people consider this to be a possible choice. But it is an option, and it can save you from all kinds of grief.

Being celibate, however, does not free you from the problems that come with sexual desire. You will not be free from sexual desire, so you will still have to deal with that. There is also, however, the appearance of sexual impropriety.

There are a lot of rules in the Vinaya that have to deal with this issue. And living in the age of social media, men and women have to deal with the appearance of impropriety. In the Vinaya monks are not even allowed to be in the company of a woman unless they are with at least one other monk. So even in 400 BCE the Buddha was concerned with how things looked. Lay people were very quick to criticize the monks (it was mainly monks) for anything that looked inappropriate. Now that we have so many ways to broadcast rumor and innuendo, this problem is much worse. Some people spread lies simply out of meanness.

So one issue is your choice about sex, and the second issue is being careful about the appearance of impropriety. Both of these issues are harder for lay people than monks and nuns because I think that most people give monastics the benefit of the doubt. And I can tell you from painful personal experience, it is quite the opposite for lay people. People are quick to assume the worst.

I do not have any simple answers to either of these issues. But I mention the Vinaya rules as one possible guide. If you choose to be celibate or not, be aware that being alone with someone who might be viewed as a lover could cause you a great deal of harm. At least try to be sensitive to that fact and avoid any obvious appearances of impropriety. For men, in particular, it is helpful if you avoid being alone with a woman if that could be taken the wrong way.

Most people will not, of course, choose celibacy. At the Zen Mountain Monastery they have this rule: you may have one committed, monogamous relationship. (In Japanese Buddhism monks and priests are uniquely not celibate.) I think that is a very wise rule. Also note that the Buddha never specified heterosexuality. He only put down a rule about abstaining from sexual misconduct, sexual conduct that can cause harm to yourself or others. He also never said that you have to be married.

(At the time of the Buddha marriage was not a legal issue in India. It was a simple agreement between two people. Polygamy was also common,

particularly among royalty.)

The Buddha offered this advice to people in “one, committed monogamous relationship”:

“There are five ways in which a husband should minister to his wife as the western direction: by honoring her, by not disparaging her, by not being unfaithful to her, by giving authority to her, by providing her with adornments. And there are five ways in which a wife, thus ministered to by her husband as the western direction, will reciprocate: by properly organizing her work, by being kind to the servants, by not being unfaithful, by protecting stores, and by being skillful and diligent in all she has to do. In this way the western direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.” - [DN 31.30]

Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda has these comments about the Buddha’s instructions:

Knowing the psychology of the man who tends to consider himself superior, the Buddha made a remarkable change and uplifted the status of a woman by a simple suggestion that a husband should honor and respect his wife. A husband should be faithful to his wife, which means that a husband should fulfill and maintain his marital obligations to his wife thus sustaining the confidence in the marital relationship in every sense of the word. The husband, being a bread-winner, would invariably stay away from home, hence he should entrust the domestic or household duties to the wife who should be considered as the keeper and the distributor of the property and the home economic-administrator. The

provision of befitting ornaments to the wife should be symbolic of the husband's love, care and attention showered on the wife. This symbolic practice has been carried out from time immemorial in Buddhist communities. Unfortunately it is in danger of dying out because of the influence of modern civilization.

- [Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda, "[A Happy Married Life: A Buddhist Perspective](#)"]

(Venerable Dhammananda is from Burma, thus the comments about modern civilization.)

As to the responsibilities of a wife, Venerable Dhammananda makes these comments:

In advising women about their role in married life, the Buddha appreciated that the peace and harmony of a home rested largely on a woman. His advice was realistic and practical when he explained a good number of day-to-day characteristics which a woman should or should not cultivate. On diverse occasions, the Buddha counseled that a wife should:

- *not harbor evil thoughts against her husband;*
- *not be cruel, harsh or domineering;*
- *not be spendthrift but should be economical and live within her means;*
- *guard and save her husband's hard-earned earnings and property;*
- *always be attentive and chaste in mind and action;*
- *be faithful and harbor no thought of any adulterous acts;*
- *be refined in speech and polite in action;*

- *be kind, industrious and hardworking;*
- *be thoughtful and compassionate towards her husband, and her attitude should equate that of a mother's love and concern for the protection of her only son;*
- *be modest and respectful;*
- *be cool, calm and understanding — serving not only as a wife but also as a friend and advisor when the need arises.*

- [Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda, "[A Happy Married Life: A Buddhist Perspective](#)"]

You have to do a little modern translation on some of these criteria, but for the most part I think you can see that they are practical. In our romantic relationships, we tend to focus on what we want. This is craving. The Buddha focused on what our responsibilities are, on what we can give, and what we should do. This is generosity.

The rule about sex as stated in the Five Precepts is more general and flexible than either celibacy or committing to one relationship. The rule is to act in a sexually responsible way and not to use your sexual energy in a way that harms you or anyone else. So that is the rule. But be careful about using the flexibility in the rule to justify giving in to dubious sexual desires.

The Buddha warned us repeatedly about the dangers in sensual pleasures:

“Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause, sensual pleasures as the source, sensual pleasures as the basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures, people indulge in misconduct of body, speech, and mind. Having done so, on the dissolution of the body, after death, they reappear in states of deprivation, in an unhappy

destination, in perdition, even in hell. Now this is a danger in the case of sensual pleasures, a mass of suffering in the life to come, having sensual pleasures as its cause, sensual pleasures as its source, sensual pleasures as its basis, the cause being simply sensual pleasures.” - [MN 13.15]

Having said that and given proper warning, it is certainly possible to create a sexually responsible situation in which there is no harm. I once saw an interview with a Swedish woman who was the CEO of her own company. She had no interest in a committed, monogamous relationship. She had no desire for children. But she did not want to be celibate. So she found a male escort.

The story also included an interview with the escort. As far as I could tell he was a decent, responsible person. He cared about his clients. Like any good businessperson, he cared about them beyond their business relationship. He worried about them, and he tried to take care of them.

I think that type of relationship is more difficult if the gender roles are reversed. The dynamics are more complicated, and women are so often used and abused. However it is possible, and I have seen interviews with female escorts who seemed at ease with their choices in life.

These, of course, are extreme examples. I am simply pointing out that there is a range of possibilities that satisfy the precept. But be very careful about rationalizations.

In summary:

1. You may choose celibacy.
2. If you do not choose celibacy, commit to one monogamous relationship.
3. If you do not choose celibacy or a single, committed relationship make sure – as much as possible – to be responsible and cause no harm. In particular be sensitive to your motivation and intent.

4. Whatever choice you make be sensitive to putting yourself into a position that might be misinterpreted.

The Buddha's Advice to Lay People

We have already seen some of the advice that the Buddha gave to lay people, such as in the case of money.

The “Sigālaka Sutta: To Sigālaka” [DN 31] is a discourse devoted entirely to the Buddha's advice to lay people. The vehicle for this advice is a conversation with Sigālaka, a young man the Buddha met as he was walking down the road.

As far as we can tell from the sutta, Sigālaka had never met the Buddha before. The Buddha saw Sigālaka “bowing in the six directions” and asked him why he was doing that. Sigālaka told the Buddha that when his father was dying, he asked Sigālaka to do this every morning. Sigālaka was a loving and respectful son who was honoring his dead father's wishes. It is a warm and intimate setting for the Buddha's conversation with him.

The Buddha began his discourse by emphasizing the importance of being around people of integrity, people who encourage you to live a happy, responsible way, and in particular, people who will not take advantage of you. The Buddha spoke so often about the importance of good friendship:

“Householder's son, there are these four types who can be seen as foes in friendly guise: the man who is all take is one, the great talker is one, the flatterer is one, and the fellow-spendthrift is one.

(1) “The man who is all take can be seen to be a false friend for four reasons: he takes everything, he wants a lot for very little, what he must do he does out of fear,

and he seeks his own ends.

(2) "The great talker can be seen to be a false friend for four reasons: he talks of favors in the past, and in the future, he mouths empty phrases of goodwill, and when something needs to be done in the present, he pleads inability owing to some disaster.

(3) "The flatterer can be seen to be a false friend for four reasons: he assents to bad actions, he dissents from good actions, he praises you to your face, and he disparages you behind your back.

(4) "The fellow-spendthrift can be seen to be a false friend for four reasons: he is a companion when you indulge in strong drink, when you haunt the streets at unfitting times, when you frequent fairs, and when you indulge in gambling." - [DN 31.15-19]

One of the striking things about the Buddha's teachings is that they can seem almost hopelessly simple-minded. But then something will happen in your own life, and you stumble across a passage like this. Upon reflection, you will have seen that someone took advantage of you in just this way. Someone will flatter you or get you to spend money on them or something like that, and it may take a while for you to see that you were manipulated.

I know an extreme case where a woman got married, and it took a long time for her to realize that not only was her husband spending all of her money, but he was already married to two other women. This sounds like the stuff of tabloids, but it happens, and it happens to people who are otherwise intelligent, successful, and educated. Almost all of us have emotional buttons to push, and some people are very good at finding and pushing them.

So while some of these passages in the Canon may seem simple-minded, I encourage you to think about them seriously. You may have to translate them into modern terms, but I think you will find that they still apply.

Fortunately, the Buddha did not just warn us about the calamities that can happen with bad companionship. He was also sure to point out the virtues of a true friend:

“Householder's son, there are these four types who can be seen to be loyal friends: the friend who is a helper is one, the friend who is the same in happy and unhappy times is one, the friend who points out what is good for you is one, and the friend who is sympathetic is one.

(1) “The helpful friend can be seen to be a loyal friend in four ways: he looks after you when you are inattentive, he looks after your possessions when you are inattentive, he is a refuge when you are afraid, and when some business is to be done he lets you have twice what you ask for.

(2) “The friend who is the same in happy and unhappy times can be seen to be a loyal friend in four ways: he tells you his secrets, he guards your secrets, he does not let you down in misfortune, he would even sacrifice his life for you.

(3) “The friend who points out what is good for you can be seen to be a loyal friend in four ways: he keeps you from wrongdoing, he supports you in doing good, he informs you of what you did not know, and he points out the path to heaven.

(4) “The sympathetic friend can be seen to be a loyal friend in four ways: he does not rejoice at your

misfortune, he rejoices at your good fortune, he stops others who speak against you, and he commends others who speak in praise of you.” - [DN 31.21-25]

The Buddha spoke so often about the importance of good friendship. This passage, in particular, has a lovely poetry about it. And here he was not speaking to monks and nuns. He was speaking to the layperson Sigālaka.

The Buddha went on to say this:

“And how, householder’s son, does the Ariyan disciple protect the six directions? These six things are to be regarded as the six directions. The east denotes mother and father. The south denotes teachers, the west denotes wife and children. The north denotes friends and companions. The nadir denotes servants, workers and helpers. The zenith denotes ascetics and brahmins.” - [DN 31.27]

Now we see the Buddha changing course. As he so often did, he took a common model – in this case, the six directions – and used it as a simile for his own teaching.

Another aspect to the Buddha’s teachings that may seem quaint is what appears to be an Asian, conservative social model. This is especially true when it comes to having respect for your parents.

I went through this with my mother. For the last ten years of her life, frankly, she gave me fits. My mother was angry and self-absorbed and extremely difficult. I have a hundred war stories.

But whatever that time was like, she was still my mother. We all choose to relate to life in a particular way. It is important to state that this is a choice. In fact, I saw my mother do this. One day I was trying to find a way for her to be a little more positive. I mentioned how many

wonderful friends she had, which was true. She spent the next hour going through her entire inventory of friends and telling me what was wrong with each of them. So that was her choice.

But my mother was also a remarkable woman. She grew up very poor but loved school. She was only the second person in my family, going back to 1754, to graduate high school. She got a job as a waitress and paid room and board to her parents so that she could finish school. Then she somehow managed to get through secretarial school.

In a family that did not care about music at all, my mother taught herself to play the piano and organ. I grew up in a household of books and ideas and beautiful music. I was always loved and cared for. I was always fed. I always had clothes. When I was sick, I saw the doctor.

Later in life, after I graduated from college, my mother went to college herself at the age of 50. She graduated summa cum laude while working full-time, and she did it in just three years. Then a year later she quit her job and went to graduate school full time. At the age of 60 she started a new career as a school psychologist at the Delaware Autistic Program in Newark, Delaware. She worked for 15 years at that job and left with full retirement benefits at the age of 75.

Like so many people, my relationships with my parents were not easy. But because of the Dharma, I learned to get over myself. I know that there are extreme situations where parents do not deserve respect. They are not common, but they do happen. But for the majority of us, it is useful to adopt an attitude of love and gratitude, even if the relationships are a very long way from being ideal.

This is a famous passage from the *Anguttara Nikāya* about parents:

“Even if one should carry about one’s mother on one shoulder and one’s father on the other, and [while doing so] should have a lifespan of a hundred years, live for a hundred years; and if one should attend to them by

anointing them with balms, by massaging, bathing, and rubbing their limbs, and they even void their urine and excrement there, one still would not have done enough for one's parents, nor would one have repaid them. Even if one were to establish one's parents as the supreme lords and rulers over this great earth abounding in the seven treasures, one still would not have done enough for one's parents, nor would one have repaid them. For what reason? Parents are of great help to their children; they bring them up, feed them, and show them the world.

"But, bhikkhus, if, when one's parents lack faith, one encourages, settles, and establishes them in faith; if, when one's parents are immoral, one encourages, settles, and establishes them in virtuous behavior; if, when one's parents are miserly, one encourages, settles, and establishes them in generosity; if, when one's parents are unwise, one encourages, settles, and establishes them in wisdom: in such a way, one has done enough for one's parents, repaid them, and done more than enough for them." - [AN 2.33]

The Buddha began this beautiful passage by telling us that we owe our parents a great debt of gratitude, that "Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and [while doing so] should have a lifespan of a hundred years..." etc. Our parents put forth great effort in order to be our parents.

But then he went on to say that if we can teach the Dharma to our parents, then we have repaid them "and done more than enough for them."

You never know what effect your actions or words will have, so even in a case like mine, where you have a very difficult situation, it is important to behave in a noble, loving way. This may have an influence far beyond

what you know.

In the last week of my mother's life she did not, as far as we could tell, recognize anyone. But when I showed up to see her, for the first time in days she looked at me, and for just an instant there was a twinkle in her eye. Then it vanished. I looked at one of the nurses and said, "Did you see that?" She smiled and nodded.

Speech

"And what, bhikkhus, is right speech? Abstinence from false speech, abstinence from divisive speech, abstinence from harsh speech, abstinence from idle chatter: this is called right speech." - [SN 45.8]

By now the precept on right speech should be familiar. The first aspect is honesty, truthfulness. As the Buddha told his seven-year-old son, Rāhula:

"...Rāhula, when one is not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie, there is no evil, I say, that one would not do. Therefore, Rāhula, you should train thus: 'I will not utter a falsehood even as a joke.'" - [MN 61.7]

Then there is the precept on divisive speech, the Fox News Precept. This is speech that is hateful and fear mongering. It causes division and distrust:

"Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: 'If someone were to divide me from my friends by divisive speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to divide another from his friends by divisive speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the

other too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me?’ Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from divisive speech, exhorts others to abstain from divisive speech, and speaks in praise of abstinence from divisive speech. Thus this bodily conduct of his is purified in three respects.” - [SN 55.7]

Next, there is harsh speech. This is yelling, being abusive, name calling, and being emotionally manipulative. Its intent is to hurt someone, or to promote your own self as superior to others:

“Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘If someone were to address me with harsh speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to address another with harsh speech, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the other too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me?’ Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from harsh speech, exhorts others to abstain from harsh speech, and speaks in praise of abstinence from harsh speech. Thus this bodily conduct of his is purified in three respects.” - [SN 55.7]

But I want to concentrate here on the one that seems to be the least harmful, and that is idle chatter, or gossip:

“Again, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘If someone were to address me with frivolous speech and idle chatter, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now if I were to address another with frivolous speech and idle chatter, that would not be pleasing and

agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the other too. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me?’ Having reflected thus, he himself abstains from idle chatter, exhorts others to abstain from idle chatter, and speaks in praise of abstinence from idle chatter. Thus this verbal conduct of his is purified in three respects.” - [SN 55.7]

This is the one that we most often break, and we do so without a moment’s hesitation. Anyone who has practiced even a short time has a little guardian angel (or deva) who knows when we are lying, being divisive, or harsh. But that angel seems to be on holiday when we are idly chattering away.

Ṭhānnisaro Bhikkhu tells a story about being in Thailand. He and another Western monk were given a task. I think it was to prepare a meditation hall for a ceremony. He and the other monk managed to complete the entire task without speaking. Later one of the lay Thai Buddhists, who observed this, commented on what had happened, saying that he did not think that Western monks were capable of doing *anything* without talking about it.

If you have ever been on a silent retreat, you have probably seen this happen. You are on retreat for seven days or ten days or whatever it is, and there is almost no talk. You may say a few words during an interview or for your work job, but that is about it.

Then the retreat ends, and within about seven minutes you would think you are at a soccer match. There is so much chatter, and it gets louder and louder, and just ten minutes before the hall had been silent. And if you listen in on the conversations, it is almost entirely idle chatter. I got into the habit of cleaning my room and packing my car on the last day of a retreat so that I could leave immediately and avoid the post-retreat cacophony.

I have seen this happen at meditation groups as well. There will be a sitting period, and then there is a short break before the Dharma talk or Dharma discussion. The same thing happens. Sometimes you have to start yelling or wildly ringing a bell to get people to come back into the meditation hall. It is quite discourteous to those who are patiently waiting.

In the Buddha's teaching the only speech that is really wise or right speech is either a) speech that is for practical purposes of completing tasks or 2) Dharma discussion. We see this in this lovely passage about the Buddha's cousin Anuruddha. Anuruddha described how he and his two companions lived:

"...whichever of us returns first from the village with alms-food prepares the seats, sets out the water for drinking and for washing, and puts the refuse bucket in its place. Whichever of us returns last eats any food left over, if he wishes; otherwise he throws it away where there is no greenery or drops it into water where there is no life. He puts away the seats and the water for drinking and for washing. He puts away the refuse bucket after washing it, and he sweeps out the refectory. Whoever notices that the pots of water for drinking, washing, or the latrine are low or empty takes care of them. If they are too heavy for him, he calls someone else by a signal of the hand and they move it by joining hands, but because of this we do not break out into speech. But every five days we sit together all night discussing the Dhamma. That is how we abide diligent, ardent, and resolute." - [MN 128.11-14]

Of course, some social speech is necessary. In the Buddha's discourses, his interactions with people often start with preliminary courtesies. You will see passages like this in the Pāli Canon that describe these exchanges:

Then Saccaka the Nigaṇṭha's son, together with a large following of Licchavis, entered the Great Wood and went to the Blessed One. He exchanged greetings with the Blessed One, and after this courteous and amiable talk was finished, sat down at one side. Some of the Licchavis paid homage to the Blessed One and sat down at one side; some exchanged greetings with him, and when this courteous and amiable talk was finished, sat down at one side; some extended their hands in reverential salutation towards the Blessed One and sat down at one side; some pronounced their name and clan in the Blessed One's presence and sat down at one side; some kept silent and sat down at one side. - [MN 35.8]

But such courtesies should not take long. Generally, you can get almost an entire report on someone's life in a few minutes. On those occasions when I went to a retreat and wanted to see some old friends, I would seek them out as soon as the retreat ended. But it does not take long to express joy at seeing them and to get caught up to date.

Some of us are addicted to social interaction. And these days we have so many ways to facilitate wrong speech. We are on our phones incessantly. We check our email and Twitter and Instagram every few minutes.

The next time you talk to someone, ask yourself afterward, "How much of that really needed to be said?" This is another mindfulness practice. It is a way to learn how our habitual patterns are controlling us.

Community

In the Buddhist world we will almost always become part of a Buddhist community at some point. When we go to a retreat that is a temporary community. If we have a small sitting group at our house that is another type of community. And many times we will become part of a larger, more organized local community.

I have been a member of all these types of communities. Inevitably, some of them work better than others. There are some characteristics that make for successful communities, and there are characteristics that almost ensure their failure.

We have a unique situation in the West because lay people run many of these Buddhist communities. This is not true in Asia where the Buddhist leadership is monastic. Because monastics are full-time professional Buddhists, they have a certain authority. And the Vinaya provides rules for keeping harmony within the monastic Saṅgha, so lay people follow the lead of the monastics.

When you transport that model to lay-only communities, it does not always translate well. Further, many Buddhist schools have the notion of a guru, someone who “imparts transcendent knowledge.” This is a hierarchical structure. These types of organizations have two weaknesses. First, they lack transparency. Second is dependence on a single individual.

The lack of transparency has been sadly evident in Western Buddhism. We have already seen cases of Dharma teachers who committed acts of sexual abuse, ruining marriages, manipulating people emotionally, and swindling them financially.

There is also a lack of opportunity, often, for criticism. The Buddhist culture is one of respect and deference. That works well as long as the respect and deference are warranted. I have been at retreats where the teachers were saying things that I knew were not true. And it is not part of the culture to challenge teachers. An obvious example is a teacher who said that the Buddha never talked about rebirth. This is a bazaar statement. But it was not clear to me that I could challenge it in front of 40 or so other people, or that it was in any way appropriate.

I suppose it is not surprising that the best teachers that I have ever had were also the most open. One of them used to get quite agitated if you did not ask questions after a Dharma talk. He would lecture us on what

poor form it was not to question. He said it was positively un-Buddhist. Thānissaro Bhikkhu has even written a book about questioning called *Skill in Questions*.

“Just as if a man with good eyesight standing on the shore of a body of water were to see a large fish rise. The thought would occur to him, ‘From the rise of this fish, from the break of its ripples, from its speed, it is a large fish, not a small one.’ In the same way, one individual, in discussion with another, knows this: ‘From the way this person rises to an issue, from the way he applies [his reasoning], from the way he addresses a question, he is discerning, not dull.’” — [AN 4:192]

Unfortunately, in many Buddhist groups and situations, there is no opportunity for giving feedback. It is often actively discouraged. I once belonged to a group that had a small set of people who were “authorized” to give Dharma talks. I never quite figured out how one became “authorized.” Further they had a rule that within this group they were not allowed to criticize each other’s talks. Without an opportunity for feedback, criticism, and questioning, you never get better at what you are doing.

Another problem that happens frequently is that one or several people who have aggressive personalities end up dominating lay groups. I discussed this once with a senior staff member at a large meditation center. He was getting his Ph.D. in Buddhism and was also studying lay groups to see which ones worked and which ones did not. He was fairly pessimistic about lay Buddhist groups for this very reason. You start with a group of well-meaning people, but then someone wants to be the guru. They want to be the spiritual authority. Almost by definition this is not the person that you want running the group. But that is what ends up happening.

This all sounds very grim, and I don’t want to make it sound like running

a large lay Buddhist group is impossible. A lot of it depends on the motivations of the people involved. And I think it starts with humility.

It is unlikely that anyone in a lay Buddhist group is even a stream-enterer. There are some, but it is rare. So as long as that is the case, everyone in the group should be humble about the practice. And if someone is a stream-enterer, I would think they would be naturally humble. Their main motivation will be altruistic. They will want to help people. That is the nature of the awakening process.

(I used to work with someone who liked to say to me, "Eric, you are a humble person, and with good reason.")

Second, the issue of transparency is extremely important. This means especially being self-reflective and self-critical. Good organizations are inclusive. Just as a craftsperson constantly strives to learn and improve and get better at their craft, an organization wants to do the same. Of course, there is a skill to criticism and reflection. One of my best Dharma friends is not afraid to criticize me when she thinks I am going off the rails, but she also does it in a wise and tactful way.

It is important for organizations to ask for feedback and suggestions. There should be at least one anonymous way for this to happen, like a suggestion box. Some people are not comfortable talking in public, and this has to be respected.

I once worked for a company where we had annual meetings. Each department got together and discussed what had happened in the previous year, what had worked well, and what had not worked well. Then we discussed what changes we might make based on that experience. Then we looked forward to the next year. What would we like to do? What would we like to accomplish? We set measurable goals for the next year. Then the following year we began by looking at that list and seeing how we did. I think this is a good model for lay Buddhist groups.

I also think that it is important for Buddhist groups to have a clear

direction for the practice. There are many ways to practice. This does not mean that it has to be one size fits all. But it is very hard to have a group that is part Zen, part vipassana, part this, and part that. It will not be coherent. It will simply be confusing. There has to be a clear style of practice. Certainly, you may venture outside of that every once in a while. I do that in my own practice. But overall there has to be a clear, consistent style of practice.

The Buddha himself suggested that successful communities meet often and do so in harmony. There is this conversation between the Buddha and Ānanda in the *Digha Nikāya*:

fanning him. And the Lord said: “Ānanda, have you heard that the Vajjians hold regular and frequent assemblies?”

“I have heard, Lord, that they do.”

1) “Ānanda, as long as the Vajjians hold regular and frequent assemblies, they may be expected to prosper and not decline. Have you heard that the Vajjians meet in harmony, break up in harmony, and carry on their business in harmony?”

“I have heard, Lord, that they do.”

2) “Ānanda, as long as the Vajjians meet in harmony, break up in harmony, and carry on their business in harmony, they may be expected to prosper and not decline.

3) “Have you heard that the Vajjians do not authorize what has not been authorized already, and do not abolish what has been authorized, but proceed according to what has been authorized by their ancient tradition?”

“I have, Lord...”

4) “Have you heard that they honor, respect, revere and salute the elders among them, and consider them worth listening to?...”

5) “that they do not forcibly abduct others’ wives and daughters and compel them to live with them?...”

6) “that they honor, respect, revere and salute the Vajjian shrines at home and abroad, not withdrawing the proper support made and given before?...”

7) “that proper provision is made for the safety of Arahants, so that such Arahants may come in future to live there, and those already there may dwell in comfort?”

“I have, Lord.”

“Ānanda, so long as such proper provision is made... the Vajjians may be expected to prosper and not decline.”

Then the Lord said to the Brahmān Vassakāra: “Once, Brahmān, when I was at the Sārandada Shrine in Vesāli, I taught the Vajjians these seven principles for preventing decline, and as long as they keep to these seven principles, as long as these principles remain in force, the Vajjians may be expected to prosper and not decline.” - [DN 16.1.4-1.5]

One of the purposes of the Vinaya is to keep harmony in the Saṅgha and to provide mechanisms for resolving disputes. However, I am not sure that the Vinaya provides a good model for lay Buddhist groups. It is based mainly on seniority, seniority in the Saṅgha being based on how many years you have been ordained. In the lay world, how many years

someone has practiced does not give a good corollary. Many of those years may have been pretty casual. That is certainly true in my life.

It is also important to keep personal information confidential. When people discuss their lives in Dharma groups, they can talk about things that are quite intimate. I was in a group once where someone admitted to being a sex addict. Whatever the group discusses has to stay there. This is especially important in these days of social media.

Lay groups often need to handle financial assets to pay rent and handle other expenses. Donations and assets should always belong to the group. Payments should never be given to individuals. This also allows the group to help pay for member's activities. If someone needs help with travel money to go to a monastery, the group can do that. This is the traditional monastic model. The group takes care of the group members, and the financial assets belong to the whole group. The assets are there to support the individual members. Of course, if someone can afford these activities on their own, they should do so.

Occasionally the group may have someone come to visit and help with the practice. If that person is a monastic, it is appropriate to pay their expenses and donate to the monastery. If the person is a layperson, the group may want to pay for their travel.

For certain aspects of practice, it may be necessary for group members to go to a monastery or practice center. I strongly encourage you to only go to centers that do not charge. There are a number of them in the U.S. These include the Metta Forest Monastery, the Birken Forest Monastery, the Arrow Forest Hermitage, and the Bhavana Society. There are others. If you want to go somewhere to practice jhāna, I recommend the Metta Forest Monastery. It will probably be difficult to attain jhāna without being in this type of setting. Of course, it is also appropriate to support these centers financially if you can.

I will summarize with these thoughts:

1. The leadership of a group has to be open and inclusive.

2. All members of a group must be humble and respectful, especially when it comes to how they criticize.
3. As the Buddha advises, you should have regular opportunities for group members to reflect and offer suggestions. While in the monastic community formal meetings take place in new moon and full moon nights, in lay groups it is more typical to do this every two weeks. You may also want to consider an annual (or whatever seems appropriate) meeting to discuss goals for the following year.
4. There has to be a clear mode of practice.
5. Group leaders should all follow at least the first four precepts (or “seven” as in the seven precept formulation where the four aspects of speech are broken out).
6. Group members must agree to keep anything discussed in the group confidential.
7. Financial assets belong to the group and are there to support the practices of the members. This is especially true for those who otherwise cannot afford activities like traveling to a monastery.
8. Individuals should never receive payment for teaching the Dharma. However, it may be appropriate to pay for travel expenses, especially if the teacher is a monastic. Likewise, if the teacher is a monastic, it is appropriate to make a donation to the monastery.

Forbearance and Patience

The discussion on community leads naturally to a discussion about patience and forbearance.

The Pāli word for patience is “khanti” (Sanskrit: kṣānti). It also means “forbearance.” These two words have slightly different meanings.

Patience is what you need when you are hand-sanding kitchen cabinets. Forbearance is what you need when the neighbor’s dog is barking.

I was at a retreat some years ago, and the people in that group were so

sensitive to the slightest noise that I called it “The Princess and the Pea” saṅgha. Of course, we would like silence when we are on retreat. We would like silence when we practice in our own homes or at the local Dharma center. But that is not always possible, and it is not always appropriate. This practice is not about what is out there. It is about what is happening in our own minds.

As with so many aspects of the Buddhist path, there is a middle ground, and it is not always easy to know what that is. But in dealing with people there will come a time when the gift of patience and forbearance is appropriate.

I was once talking to someone who had just come back from a 10-day meditation retreat. When I asked him how it went, he launched into a tirade about the guy sitting behind him who was breathing loudly. If you go to enough retreats this kind of thing will happen. Someone will have a cold or be very restless or something like that, and the mind will go right to a place of suffering. We only go to one or two retreats a year, they are expensive, they take time and energy, and here this guy is wheezing like a freight train and ruining our precious time there.

There is an extreme version of this in a story about a noted Western monk, Ajahn Sumedho. Ajahn Sumedho was the abbot of the Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England. I tried to find a recorded version of this story but I could not, so I hope I get the gist of it correct.

Ajahn Sumedho studied under the legendary Thai forest monk Ajahn Chah. At that monastery there was a very loud monk who had a terrible time with wrong speech. He was extremely disruptive to the monastery. Ajahn Sumedho was a new monk at the time, and he could not understand why no one did anything about this.

Ajahn Sumedho took it upon himself to solve this problem. He started putting together an ironclad case against the monk. He recorded times, dates, and detailed descriptions of all the instances when this monk was disruptive.

Finally, there was a time when it just so happened that Ajahn Chah was away from the monastery. On the next Uposatha Day, which is when these sorts of issues are raised and resolved, Ajahn Sumedho got up and presented his lengthy legal case. He was quite proud of himself. He thought that he had done a great service to the monastery.

He was very surprised, therefore, when no one said anything to him afterward. In fact, many of the monks looked uncomfortable. The offending monk quietly slipped out of the monastery the next morning and was never seen again.

When Ajahn Chah returned he was horrified to find out what had happened. Ajahn Chah immediately left the monastery, got on a train and tried to find the monk.

When Ajahn Chah got back to the monastery, he sat down with Ajahn Sumedho. "Yes," Ajahn Chah said, "this monk had a terrible problem with wrong speech." But he was an otherwise good monk. He had been kicked out of several other monasteries because of his loud speech, and Ajahn Chah's monastery was the only one that would take him in. By humiliating him in such a public way, Ajahn Sumedho had made it impossible for him to remain a monk.

And that is what I told my friend. "Ah," I said, "So it was an opportunity to give the gift of forbearance and patience."

Politics

Thich Nhat Hanh: Deep listening is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of another person. You can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart. Even if he says things that are full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of continuing to listen with compassion. Because you know that listening like

that, you give that person a chance to suffer less. If you want to help him to correct his perception, you wait for another time. For now, you don't interrupt. You don't argue. If you do, he loses his chance. You just listen with compassion and help him to suffer less. One hour like that can bring transformation and healing.

Oprah: *I love this idea of deep listening, because often when someone comes to you and wants to vent, it's so tempting to start giving advice. But if you allow the person just to let the feelings out, and then at another time come back with advice or comments, that person would experience a deeper healing. That's what you're saying.*

Nhat Hanh: *Yes. Deep listening helps us to recognize the existence of wrong perceptions in the other person and wrong perceptions in us. The other person has wrong perceptions about himself and about us. And we have wrong perceptions about ourselves and the other person. And that is the foundation for violence and conflict and war. The terrorists, they have the wrong perception. They believe that the other group is trying to destroy them as a religion, as a civilization. So they want to abolish us, to kill us before we can kill them. And the antiterrorist may think very much the same way — that these are terrorists and they are trying to eliminate us, so we have to eliminate them first. Both sides are motivated by fear, by anger, and by wrong perception. But wrong perceptions cannot be removed by guns and bombs. They should be removed by deep listening, compassionate listening, and loving space.*

- [Interview between Thich Nhat Hanh and Oprah Winfrey, <http://cultureofempathy.com/references/Experts/Thich-Nhat-Hanh.htm>]

As I write this we are in the middle of some political challenges in the United States, and I think it is worth saying something about how we relate to politics.

One of the things that Buddhist practice does for us is to put our lives into a larger context. According to the Buddha's teaching, we have been born and reborn and reborn an infinite number of times. We have been beings of every shape, size, and description. We have been men and women, rich and poor, white and red and black and yellow, strong and weak. If you can name a way to differentiate between beings, we have all been there.

Now we are in this life. If you are reading this you are very fortunate, because it means that you are interested in the Dharma. You want to cultivate good qualities. That is the purpose of existence.

By putting our lives into a larger context we also put them into a smaller context. This means that we know that the only way to evolve is breath-by-breath, moment-by-moment. So our lives are both larger and smaller than we had imagined. This is the space in which we live as travelers of the Buddha's path.

But our old habits die hard. If you have meditated even five minutes you know that. It takes enormous effort to overcome our habits and conditioning.

Then we come to the subject of politics. Yikes.

I am often amazed at how many people who are otherwise kind, gentle, and equanimous turn into oceans of fear and angst when it comes to political discussions. Their otherwise admirable personas go right out the window.

It helps, I think, to look at how we relate to politics the same way that we relate to the rest of our lives. Or marching orders are the same. Our purpose in life is to cultivate good qualities. We want to be compassionate, loving, kind, wise, patient, and understanding.

This does not change because the political climate changes. The world is the way it is. It goes through good times and bad. There are Nazis and there are humanitarians. There is cruelty and there is kindness. This is true now, it was true at the time of the Buddha, and it has been true always.

Because politics tends to be so emotionally charged, the danger is that we forget how we want to be in the world. I grew up in a politically charged era and in a politically active household. I was born into a life consumed with politics. When I was in college, I was trained as a community organizer. This is how I thought that I would spend my life, fighting for equal rights, humanitarian causes, and fairness for all people. And that all sounds very noble.

To some extent it was, but it was handicapped by two serious problems. The first was that like many political people, I was motivated mainly by anger. The term that a lot of people like to use is "righteous indignation." You claim the moral high ground, and then you use it to justify a lot of unskillful behavior.

The other problem was that I lacked wisdom. The solutions to many political problems are not always simple or obvious. In fact, one thing that I learned as an engineer is that the most common mistake that people make is to misdefine the problem. Once you have misdefined the problem, you can't possibly come up with the right solution.

Social problems like poverty and racism and war and economic inequality do not have simple solutions, otherwise we would have solved them.

When I see people who are politically active, the first question that I ask is the same one that I would ask in any situation: what is the intention?

What is the motivation? And if it is anger, fear, anxiety, greed or ignorance, I have a pretty good idea that the outcome is not likely to be very good.

The problems of the world are so often not about being a member of this or that group or having this or that ideology. They are about poor intention. If something tragic happens and you meet that with anger, the outcome is not going to be very beneficial.

Larry Rosenberg commented once that when he was in the anti-war (Viet Nam) movement, there was more anger there than there was in the war.

We demonize people on the other side of the political aisle. What we need is understanding. We need to listen. We need to look beneath the obvious surface problems to the ones that are below, the ones that are fueling the fire.

The political leaders who are the most admirable are the ones who stand for social justice with compassion, love, and wisdom. They never give in to anger. Gandhi was that way. Nelson Mandela was that way. Martin Luther King, Jr., was that way.

Nelson Mandela was in prison for 27 years. He used that time to get to know his persecutors. When he was released, instead of getting revenge he used his knowledge of them to make South Africa a more inclusive society. If you ever want to be inspired by his compassion and understanding, watch the movie "Invictus."

If we want to be politically and socially active, we must have Right Understanding and Right Intention. Right Understanding is wisdom. Right Intention is altruism.

Every one of us is born into a situation. We come into the world with different temperaments, skills, and inclinations. We are born into different families and backgrounds, different ethnicities, different genders, and different economic conditions. That is the hand we are dealt. Then it is up to us to make something of that. And in our next life

we may have a different hand. Maybe we will be on the other side of those fences.

I think most people would like to make a difference in the world. You can do that in many ways. There was an earthquake in South American this year and there was a local drive to send water filters to the affected areas. That is one type of activity. But it also took a group of engineers and scientists to make those water filters. Someone has to run the company that makes and sells them. They have to be manufactured, packed, and shipped.

You never know what effect a simple action will have. Giant redwood trees grow from the tiniest of seeds. Henry David Thoreau once said, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders." [Henry David Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed*]

He was speaking about nature, but this happens in human society as well. Thoreau himself was barely known while he lived. He was reclusive and reportedly mildly grumpy. But some years after he died, he inspired a young John Muir, and the modern-day environmental protection movement began. Decades later a young lawyer named Mohandas Gandhi read his essay "Civil Disobedience," and this gave rise to the modern non-violent disobedience movement. Some time later, both Gandhi and Thoreau inspired an equally young Martin Luther King, Jr. From that reclusive, obscure, mildly grumpy Henry David Thoreau sprang great redwood trees.

There are people who call themselves "socially engaged Buddhists," but I do not know how it is possible to be a socially un-engaged Buddhist. Sometimes you have to have faith in a seed. Our sitting on a cushion is a radical act. It is a humanitarian act. We practice for the benefit of others and ourselves and for all beings throughout time and space. We are cultivating peace and love and wisdom in our own minds and hearts, and then we become strong healthy seeds.



Figure: Black Lives Matter Advocate

There is a word that you do not hear very often in Dharma practice, and that is “courage.” But it takes courage to live a life of quiet dignity, peace, love, and compassion. We vow not to harm. That is the First Precept. And sometimes that means that we put ourselves in harms’ way. In recent history in Burma and Cambodia, many monks were killed. In Cambodia there are old monks and young monks, but no monks in between. The Khmer Rouge killed them all.

In Tibet, they often use the image of a warrior. Before Tibet became such a peaceful place, it was a nation of warriors. Tibet conquered a lot of Asia. And as it transformed from a military power to a place of peace, they kept a lot of the images of the old warrior nation.

When we face the outside challenges such as in Burma and Cambodia, that is one way to be a peaceful warrior. But we also take on much larger and scarier forces and those are the ones in our own minds.



Figure: Tranquil Courage

There was a Tibetan Lama who was held captive and tortured by the Chinese for many years. He finally managed to escape. When he got to India, he had a private audience with the Dalai Lama. He told the Dalai Lama how afraid he got sometimes. The Dalai Lama asked him if this was fear for his own life. "No," the Lama said, "I was afraid that if they kept torturing me, I would no longer be able to have love and compassion for them."

Every one of us has to find our way in life. You may run a food shelter. You might be a waitress. You might be a Senator or a cab driver. Wherever you are, that is where you meet the world. And if you meet that world with kindness, you never know what kind of redwood tree might grow.

Whatever hand you are dealt, play that hand well and do it with right intention. Whatever your skill set and whatever your temperament, use that to the best advantage you can. I heard once that Hasidic Jews have this notion of the planet being a big organization, and everyone in that organization has a job to do. When we all do our jobs, things work well. When we don't do our jobs, things don't go so well.

The world goes up and down; it goes through periods of war and peace; it goes through periods of human advance and decline. But we must stay steady. In the same way, we train our minds so that our habits and

conditioning do not become the tail wagging the dog, we must stay true, know our direction, and never waver. There is no statute of limitations on love, understanding, compassion, and wisdom. They are timeless and boundless, and they should manifest in us no matter what the current situation is.

Sickness, Aging and Death

A discussion about politics and perspective quite naturally leads to a discussion of death. Nothing puts our life into perspective more than contemplating our own death.

There is a joke about Buddhists that we spend our whole lives preparing for death, and there is some truth to that. But people who live well tend to die well. If you find your place in the world, then when it comes time to say good-bye, you can do that with peace and harmony and dignity.

As the Buddha told us, we are all subject to sickness, aging, and death. Perhaps that is your situation now.

Someday we will leave behind all that we know. Some of the people in our lives will leave before we do, and some of the people in our lives will see us leave them. It is the dance of life.

And finally, all that we take with us is the consequences of our actions, our karma.

This is a great incentive to practice. If you are healthy now and your mind is working well, you should use this time to be as diligent as possible. We never know when our bodies or minds will fail us, and then it may not be possible to practice:

Three years ago, when I sensed that Ajaan Suwat was about to pass away, I went to see him in Thailand. It was inspiring and heartening to see him, because even though he went through a lot of difficulties after his

accident — paralyzed from the base of the spine on down, brain damage, lung damage, having to deal with very difficult people looking after him — he always maintained his good cheer. One of the last things he said to me was that he had begun to notice that the perceptions his brain was sending to him were getting weirder and weirder all the time. He had to learn how not to listen to them. Then he said, “But that thing I got from the meditation: That hasn’t changed. That’s always there.”

“That thing” is what he called it. That’s the freedom we’re working toward, so that no matter what happens in terms of aging, illness, and death, there is always “that thing” there. That’s what we want to ferret out. That’s what we want to know. So we foster the customs of the noble ones, which focus on taking delight in this path, this path of letting go and developing. You let go of the patterns of thought, speech, and action that get in the way of clear knowing. You develop the qualities that encourage clear knowing: Right View, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration. You learn to take enjoyment in these things. You let them capture your imagination.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *Meditations 3*]

There are two ways to look at your life. One way is from here forward. That is how most people do it. And when you do that, it can conjure up a lot of fear and anxiety.

But if you look at your life from the end backward, the view is a bit different. What will you wish you had done? What will you regret? Now the fear of doing something becomes the fear of not doing it, of wasted opportunity.

We do not know what the end game will be like. We will not even be able to trust our own minds. We certainly will not be able to trust our own bodies. They are going to fail.

So we have to practice diligently. “That thing” that we get from practice will stay with us. It is reliable. And when the body dies, we go on to whatever is next with a good heart and the good qualities that we developed.

Practice helps us to relate in a more skillful way to our deaths. People who die in hospices live longer than people who receive traditional medical care. I think the reason for that is that people who die in hospices are at peace with the idea that they are going to die. They do not fight it.

When people get diseases like cancer, you often hear them use quite aggressive speech. They say they are going to fight their cancer. They say that they are going to beat it. They say they are going to win.

This puts you in an adversarial relationship to your disease. Cancer is just cancer. It is doing what cancer does. There is no reason to be at war with it.

There was a Buddhist writer, Rick Fields, who wrote a book called *How the Swans Came to the Lake*. It is a book about how Buddhism came to the West, and I highly recommend it.

Rick Fields got cancer when he was in his mid 50's and died at the age of 57. When he was in the last year of his life, he said in an interview, “I don't have a life-threatening disease; I have a disease-threatening life.”

The great Buddhist nun Ayya Khema was diagnosed with cancer in 1983. After considering all of her options, she decided to leave the cancer untreated and to let it run its course. When she told her doctor that, rather than arguing with her, he said that he understood her decision. His mother had died of cancer, and he saw what she went through with the conventional treatments. I saw my aunt die in a pretty horrible way because of the cancer drugs she got. Sometimes the treatment is worse

than the disease.

Ayya Khema died in 1997, but almost up to the end of her life she was active and teaching. She lived without fear, and she lived a life of compassion, love, wisdom, and kindness. She is a great inspiration. You should read her book *I Give You My Life*.

To be clear, if you have cancer, I am not telling you not to treat it. That depends on a lot of factors. This is not about what medical decisions you make. It is about coming to terms with your own mortality, with your own death. It is about being at peace with this inevitable part of life.

How we die will probably be pretty much how we live. So yes, we are spending our lives preparing for death. But in so doing, we live good lives, and then we at least improve the odds of a good death.

IV. Right Mindfulness

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

The Pāli Canon has two important discourses on right mindfulness. The first is the “Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.” There are two versions of this sutta. One is in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (number 10), and one is in the *Digha Nikāya* (number 22). The one that is most commonly referenced is the *Majjhima Nikāya* version, and that is the one that we will discuss here.

There are also two versions of this sutta in the Chinese versions of the Canon, the *āgamas*. These yield some interesting comparisons. It is worth looking at the differences between the three versions.

The four foundations of mindfulness are as follows:

1. The body
2. Feelings
3. The mind, or mental formations
4. Mind-objects, or mental qualities

For each foundation, or “frame of reference,” the sutta describes corresponding meditation practices. However, the inventory of practices is different in each version of the sutta. In the following table, which approximates the one in the book *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna* [Ajahn Anālayo], you see the differences in those inventories. The *Majjhima Nikāya* column is the Pāli Canon (nikāyas), and the other two are the Chinese Canons:

Satipaṭṭhāna	Majjhima Nikāya	Madhyama-āgama	Ekottarika-āgama
body	breathing postures activities body parts 4 elements corpse	postures activities counter unwholesome states forceful mind control breathing 4 jhānas perception of light reviewing sign body parts 6 elements corpse	body parts 4 elements bodily orifices corpse
feelings	3 and 6 types	3 and 18 types	3 and 6 types
mind	8 pairs	10 pairs	12 pairs
mind objects	hindrances aggregates sense-spheres Awakening factors 4 noble truths	sense spheres hindrances Awakening factors	Awakening factors jhānas

I have a theory about the differences. I will caution you that I am not a scholar, so treat this as the Buddhist equivalent of pillow talk. The Buddha's teachings have a problem in that he never gave an introductory talk about everything that he taught. There is no basic outline or overview. The monks and nuns memorized the discourses, and eventually they would see how everything fits together. Because they were memorized, the discourses were kept relatively short. Longer discourses are broken up into "recitation sections." Each discourse is a piece of the puzzle, and once they had enough pieces, they would be able to see the whole picture.

Now we move forward in time. Different groups of monks concentrated on a subset of discourses. Further, fewer and fewer monks knew the whole Canon. In Sri Lanka, there was a famine, and large numbers of monks died. There was one section of the Canon that only one monk knew. Thus, the landscape of Buddhist practice changed. The tradition was in danger of dying out.

And here we are now, many hundreds of years in the future, and we do

not memorize the discourses. In fact, very few people have read even one volume of them. And this brings me to two points about the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. The first is that I think over time more material was brought into the sutta to give it a broader scope. Its purpose was to contain many meditation practices so it could act as a general guide. Note, by the way, that I am not suggesting, as some have, that any of this material is inauthentic. It is simply material that was brought in from other parts of the Canon. Now, many years later, with three different versions of the sutta, it is easier to guess what is original.

When I first read this sutta, the section on the fourth foundation was quite confusing to me. When I later read it with some idea of what was original and what was added, it made more sense.

The second point is that one of the dangers in the Buddha's teachings is that it is easy to take one discourse or a small collection of discourses and over-extrapolate from those. For example, when you read the entire *Majjhima Nikāya*, the importance of jhāna becomes clear. That is not obvious if you just read a few discourses.

Buddhism is like anything else. It has cliques, trends, and fashions, and people and teachings in the Buddhist world come in and out of favor. In recent years, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta has gotten a lot of favorable momentum. As a result of that, I spent two years reading everything that I could about it. I took a course in it, went on a retreat about it, listened to dozens of Dharma talks on it, and so forth. But because of this popular momentum, it has, I think, taken on an importance that is out of balance. To be sure, this is a very important sutta. But it is not the whole of the Buddha's teachings, and you can only understand its importance when you put it in the context of all of his teachings.

In the next section we will talk about the eighth factor in the Noble Eightfold Path, right concentration. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is, as the title states, about the seventh factor in the path, right mindfulness. The cultivation of right mindfulness leads to the mastery of right concentration. The Buddha defined right concentration as jhāna or

meditative absorption. All seven of the previous factors culminate in the eighth factor. The eighth factor is not possible without the previous seven. But there is a particularly close bond between right mindfulness and right concentration. When right mindfulness leads to right concentration, then right concentration leads to stronger right mindfulness:

“Again, a bhikkhu develops serenity and insight in conjunction. As he is developing serenity and insight in conjunction, the path is generated. He pursues this path, develops it, and cultivates it. As he is pursuing, developing, and cultivating this path, the fetters are abandoned and the underlying tendencies are uprooted.”
- [AN 4.170]

How to Work With These Practices

We established what should be your main practice. That is to stay with the breath, to experience the breath in the whole body, to get the breath comfortable, and to do all this with a goal of establishing comfort and well-being. We have many tools in our meditative toolbox like sweeping, breath counting, and so forth.

Now we are going to add some new tools to our toolbox.

As you can see there are many practices in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. In order to make them part of your toolbox, I recommend that you do each one of them for some period of time. I cannot tell you what that period of time is. If you have a strong aversion to the practice, which happens most notably with the corpse contemplations, then drop it. Remember, the goal here is not to make more suffering for yourself. Put it aside for now. But remember that this is an important area for you to revisit. A strong aversion shows that this is an area where you need work. When you feel you are able to, you should come back to it, to push against the edge of your practice. Investigate why you are having this reaction.

Conversely, if you find the practice useful and fruitful, continue to do it. This does not necessarily mean it will be easy. You can use a practice in a number of ways. You can do it as your main practice. You can do it for one sitting here or there. You can do it for part of your sitting. Experiment and see what yields the best results.

You may also have a neutral response to it. In that case, try to do it for a few sittings to become familiar with it and then put it aside.

For every practice you learn, you will have one of the following responses to it:

1. It will be useful to you now and in the future.
2. It will be useful to you now but not in the future. At some point, it will stop being fruitful.
3. It will not be useful to you now but will be useful to you in the future.
4. It will not be useful to you now or in the future.

Work formally with them. Stick with one that is productive for you. Put aside anything that is too disturbing and come back to it when you are ready.

The First Foundation - the Body

As previously mentioned, the body is such an important foundation of mindfulness that the “Kāyagatāsati Sutta: Mindfulness of the Body” [MN 119] describes a complete path to awakening using the body as the object of meditation. Now, this is a little deceptive, because in being mindful of the body, all the foundations are present. It is simply that the body is the doorway. Nonetheless, it shows how important the body is as an object of contemplation.

In the West we are particularly disconnected from our bodies. To progress in meditation we need to connect with the mind and body. Whatever happens in the body manifests in the mind, and whatever

happens in the mind manifests in the body. If you feel an unpleasant sensation, the mind can spin it into something painful. If the mind feels stress, your body will tense up. When you get a massage, the mind calms down. The mind and body are inextricably bound. The practices that you already know, such as sweeping and whole body breath awareness, develop the connection between body and mind.

Most people either like their bodies or don't like their bodies. In either case you identify with the body as "me." If you like your body you think, "I am attractive." If you do not like your body you think, "I am unattractive." If the body is sick we say, "I am sick," and if we are healthy we say, "I am healthy." Several body practices are aimed at dis-identifying with the body as "me." The body is simply the body, as the Buddha said, "in and of itself."

Attachment to the body causes a great deal of suffering. A multi-billion dollar industry is devoted just to finger nails: \$7.47 billion in 2013.

Most of the Buddha's disciples were young men. They had a great deal of sense desire and as a result a great deal of suffering. Thus, the Buddha was particularly keen to help his disciples see the body in a more balanced way.

The objective is to really see the body as it really is. It's a living, breathing organism. It is the home to our minds. But it is also impermanent. It will die. It is also made of basic elements, just as all things in the universe are. When the body dies, these elements return to their natural state.

It is important when looking at the body practices to remember that these are antidotes to a distorted view of the body. Which practice is most helpful for you depends on what kind of distortion that is. If you are attached to your body, you need ways to disconnect from that attachment.

To that end, the Buddha sometimes used harsh language to describe the body:

“Behold this body - a painted image, a mass of heaped up sores, infirm, full of hankering - of which nothing is lasting or stable!

“Fully worn out is this body, a nest of disease, and fragile. This foul mass breaks up, for death is the end of life.” - [Dhp 147-148]

Obviously, thinking of the body in this way is a stark reminder of the realities of physical existence.

For some people, however, the relationship to the body is negative. In order to do this practice, you need a positive self image. That may sound funny in a path that teaches detachment and non-identification, but this is a process. If you have a negative self view, you must first develop a positive self view. Then you can work on no self view.

The Buddha often pointed out that the body is a powerful doorway to practice. Indeed, as we will see later, the body can be an entire path to awakening:

“Bhikkhus, when one thing is developed and cultivated, the body becomes tranquil, the mind becomes tranquil, thought and examination subside, and all wholesome qualities that pertain to true knowledge reach fulfillment by development. What is that one thing? Mindfulness directed to the body. When this one thing is developed and cultivated, the body becomes tranquil... and all wholesome qualities that pertain to true knowledge reach fulfillment by development.” - [AN 1.583]

And then there is a balanced, somewhat clinical view of the body:

“Reflecting wisely, [a bhikkhu] uses almsfood neither for amusement nor for intoxication nor for the sake of

physical beauty and attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of this body, for ending discomfort, and for assisting the holy life, considering: 'Thus I shall terminate old feelings without arousing new feelings and I shall be healthy and blameless and shall live in comfort.'" - [MN 2.14]

There is an interesting conversation in the *Milindapañha: The Questions of King Milinda* that records a conversation between King Milinda and the Buddhist sage Nāgasena about how disciples of the Buddha relate to the body:

The King asked: "Is the body dear to you recluses?"

"No, it is not."

"But then, why do you look after it, and cherish it so?"

"Has Your Majesty somewhere and at some time in the course of a battle been wounded by an arrow?"

"Yes, that has happened."

"In such cases, is not the wound anointed with salve, smeared with oil, and bandaged with fine linen?"

"Yes, so it is."

"Then, is this treatment a sign that the wound is dear to Your Majesty?"

"No, it is not dear to me, but all this is done to it so that the flesh may grow again."

"Just so the body is not dear to the recluses. Without being attached to the body they take care of it for the

purpose of making a holy life possible.”

- [Milindapañha, The Arahants and Their Bodies]

Remember that these instructions are antidotes to a problem. If you have a lot of attachment to the body, you need to see its limits. If your body view is negative, you need a positive antidote. And finally you see the body for what it really is, with pluses and minuses, important uses as well as limitations.

A soldier in the cavalry has his horse. He cares for that horse and depends for his life on it. But he never thinks, “This horse is me, this horse is who I am.” This is the proper attitude to take towards the body.

1. Mindfulness of Breathing

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating the body as a body? Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out. Breathing in long, he understands: ‘I breathe in long’; or breathing out long, he understands: ‘I breathe out long.’ Breathing in short, he understands: ‘I breathe in short’; or breathing out short, he understands: ‘I breathe out short.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation.’ Just as a skilled lathe-operator or his apprentice, when making a long turn, understands: ‘I make a long turn’; or, when

making a short turn, understands: 'I make a short turn'; so too, breathing in long, a bhikkhu understands: 'I breathe in long'... he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation.'

"In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body both internally and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in the body its nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that 'there is a body' is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body."

- [MN 10.4-5]

This is perhaps the most important and fundamental practice in all of Buddhism. This is also a dense passage, so let us take some time to break it down.

First of all, this passage is missing in the Ekottarika-āgama version of the sutta. It is hard to know why that might be. I will not speculate. But as I said, this is the most fundamental practice in Buddhism. This passage is treated in more detail in the next sutta we will look at, the "Ānāpānasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing" [MN 118].

This is the practice that we are doing. We have added some extra practices to facilitate the body practice, but they all fall under this umbrella. As we see in the first passage, we do the following steps:

1. Establish the physical and mental posture.
2. Attend to the breath, following it all the way in and all the way

out.

3. See the differences in the quality of the breath. See when the in-breath is short or long. See when the out-breath is short or long. More generally, notice all the qualities of the in-breath and out-breath. Sometimes the breath is coarse and uneven. Sometimes it is smooth as silk. In high levels of concentration, it can simply disappear.
4. Expand the awareness of the breath to the whole body. Feel the breath energy in the whole body.
5. Now calm - tranquilize - the body. The sweeping practice is very good for helping us learn how to do this.

In the next paragraph we are invited to expand our mindfulness of breathing to do several things:

1. Use the breath to contemplate the whole body internally. This means to look at our whole body in a general way, to become familiar with all phenomena as they relate to our bodies.
2. Expand that awareness to the bodies of others. See those same phenomena in others. This is akin to body language.
3. Now see those same phenomena both in our bodies and in the bodies of others. See how they are the same or different.
4. See the arising and passing away of those phenomena. The breath arises and passes away, as do all physical phenomena, like waves on the ocean.
5. Be aware of the body "in the body," that is, without adding anything to it. Be aware of the body purely as it exists. It is simply "this body."
6. Now comes the hard part: abide in the body without clinging.

More clinging = more suffering; less clinging = less suffering; no clinging = no suffering.

2. Mindfulness of Postures

(The Four Postures)

“Again, bhikkhus, when walking, a bhikkhu understands: ‘I am walking’; when standing, he understands: ‘I am standing’; when sitting, he understands: ‘I am sitting’; when lying down, he understands: ‘I am lying down’; or he understands accordingly however his body is disposed.

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally... And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

(Full Awareness)

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu is one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning; who acts in full awareness when looking ahead and looking away; who acts in full awareness when flexing and extending his limbs; who acts in full awareness when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; who acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts in full awareness when defecating and urinating; who acts in full awareness when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally... And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.” - [MN 10.6-9]

(In Ajahn Anālayo's analysis this section has two parts: postures and activities. I conflated them into one.)

Like so many of the practices, this one is easy to understand and hard to do. The Buddha is instructing us to be, at all times, aware of our body. Know when we are walking. Know when we are standing. Know when we are sitting. Know when we are lying down.

You may think that you do know these things, but it is hardly ever the case. The mind is always somewhere else, planning, fantasizing, dreaming, thinking about the past. This is how we bump into doors and drive off the road. We are simply not paying attention.

One way to work with this practice is to pick a specific time to practice body awareness. When you get up in the morning, note your body position as you go through your morning routine. You can use a noting word to bring that attention to the foreground. Note "walking" silently to yourself when you are walking. Note "standing" or "brushing" when you are brushing your teeth. This brings you back here to this present moment.

Once again, the Buddha instructed us to know the postures in our own bodies, the bodies of others, and the bodies of others and ourselves. He told us to know the body simply as the body, without adding anything else to it. It is just this body or that body, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.

Extend this awareness to everything that you do. When you move your arm know that you are moving your arm. Once there was a monk who was giving a Dharma talk. Suddenly he stopped talking, pulled his arm into his body and then extended it back out. When someone asked him what he was doing, he said that he had reflexively and unmindfully moved his arm during the talk, so he went back and repeated that motion with mindfulness.

And finally, there is that word again, clinging. "He abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world." This is awareness, at all times, of

the body, but without attachment, and without adding anything to it. This is the meaning of “the body as a body.”

3. Mindfulness of the Body Parts

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, bounded by skin, as full of many kinds of impurity thus: ‘In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.’ Just as though there were a bag with an opening at both ends full of many sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice, and a man with good eyes were to open it and review it thus: ‘This is hill rice, this is red rice, these are beans, these are peas, this is millet, this is white rice’; so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body... as full of many kinds of impurity thus: ‘In this body there are head-hairs... and urine.’

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally... And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.” - [MN 10.10-11]

Lest there be any confusion about the point of this exercise, this section is subtitled “Foulness (of the body parts)” in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This practice is designed to reduce clinging and attachment to our bodies and the bodies of others. The next time you see someone who you find

attractive, start contemplating their body in this way. Those beautiful eyes? Imagine they have been removed and are lying on the table. That beautiful skin? Mentally peel it off and see what is underneath.

Clearly, you must do this practice thoughtfully and wisely and not with aversion. If aversion is a problem, then return to the pleasantness of the breath or switch to mettā practice.

In the “Vesali Sutta: At Vesali” [SN 54.9] the Buddha encouraged his monks to contemplate the foulness of the body. After giving this discourse, the Buddha went into seclusion. During that time many monks became disgusted with their bodies and committed suicide. Please, don't do that.

When the Buddha emerged from seclusion, he asked why the community of monks “was so diminished.” When they told him what happened, he repeated the instructions in the first section on body practice. He encouraged them to do what I am encouraging you to do, and that is to return to the breath and establish a sense of well-being:

“It is in this way, bhikkhus, that concentration by mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated so that it is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial pleasant dwelling, and it disperses and quells on the spot evil unwholesome states whenever they arise.” - [SN 54.9]

This practice on the foulness of the body needs a foundation of calm, tranquility, serenity, and well-being. Then you can see into the nature of the body.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says that in Sri Lanka the medical examiners know about this practice, and they let the monks sit in while they do autopsies. That is one way to think about it, the way a doctor would.

There is a logistical problem with this practice, and that is simply remembering the body parts. You can use a cheat sheet and keep it in

front of you while you are meditating. And it is not so important that you remember every body part exactly as it is in the sutta.

Another way to do this practice is with a guided meditation. There is good one by Ayya Khema (Internet search: "[ayya khema body parts](#)").

Doing this practice without aversion is very helpful in reducing bodily attachment. It is also helpful when sensual desire arises. Remember its purpose. It is an antidote to bodily attachment and to sense desire. This practice will be most helpful if you think that you are attractive, or if you have a lot of sexual desire.

Having said that, being characteristically out of step, sometimes when I do this practice I am struck by what an amazing mechanism the human body is. I have had my share of physical problems, and sometimes it seems like the body never works properly. But when I do this practice, it seems like a miracle that the body ever worked in the first place.

4. Mindfulness of the Elements

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, by way of elements thus: ‘In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.’ Just as though a skilled butcher or his apprentice had killed a cow and was seated at the crossroads with it cut up into pieces; so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body... by way of elements thus: ‘In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.’

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally... And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in

the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.” - [MN 10.12-13]

Another way to contemplate the nature of the body is even more basic than the body parts, and that is the four elements. There is more wisdom to this than may be apparent to a modern reader. At first glance, it may seem like ancient alchemy. But the four elements represent qualities of our bodies that are true for all objects in the universe. Further, they represent a way in which we experience the world.

The four elements are:

1. **The earth element**, or solidity.
2. **The water element**, or liquidity. In ancient India, the water element was also seen as having the property of cohesion, or binding, in the sense of how water acts as a binding agent in dough.
3. **The fire element**, or heat. The fire element also has the sense of energy.
4. **The air element**, or wind. The air element also has the property of movement.

You can see and feel all these elements in your own body. When you sit on the cushion, you feel the solidity of your body as it rests on the cushion. In your mouth, you feel saliva. You feel the blood pumping through your body. This is the water element. The heat in your body is the fire element. The breath is the air element. The movement of the body is also the air element.

This practice is particularly interesting when you practice “internally and externally.” Now you do not even need another body to see the same phenomena externally. The solidity of your body is the same property as the solidity of the floor and the earth. The liquidity of your body is the same as the rivers, streams, and oceans. The heat element is the same as the heat from the sun or a fire. The wind element is the same as the wind itself. Your body has the same nature as nature itself. And when you die

those elements will not disappear, they will simply go back to being part of the cosmos.

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

- [King James Bible, Genesis 3:19]

One way to work with this practice is to take each element and then see that element in your life. It may be something happening right now or something that happened in the past. Then see how it is the same. If you are sitting on the floor, see and feel the solidity in your body, and then see and feel it in the floor or the cushion. See if you can dissolve the boundary between the two so that there is only "solidity."

Now move on to the water element. See the water element around you or in a place where you have experienced the water element. Think of rivers, streams, the ocean, anywhere where the water element exists. See the water element in your body and see how it is the same inside and out, internally and externally. You can also look at the elements in your body and the bodies of others. It is the same element. See if you can dissolve the boundary.

Then look at the fire element. Imagine the sun bathing you in warmth. Feel the coolness of the shade. Feel the warmth of another. Dissolve the boundary between the warmth and energy around you and that in your body.

The air element is everywhere. We cannot live without it. A tiny portion of the earth's atmosphere is always inside of our lungs. Some of it is inside of our mouths. It is the same air, inside and out. The air element binds us to the earth's atmosphere. When the wind blows, we feel its movement on our skin. When we move, even in still air, we feel that movement also.

In some places in the Pāli Canon [DN 33, MN 140, SN 27.9] the Buddha described two additional elements: space and consciousness. We know from science that even our apparently solid bodies are mostly empty space. Unlike some of the other elements, space is literally everywhere. The space in our bodies is the same space that stretches out to the limits of the universe. One of the formless attainments is the infinity of space, where the boundary between the space within you and outside of you disappears.

All of these five elements would not comprise a human being without the consciousness element. As with the space element, consciousness is infinite. Another of the formless attainments is the infinity of consciousness, whereas with space, the boundary between your “limited” consciousness and infinite consciousness disappears. Infinite consciousness is the consciousness that is aware of infinite space.

Another way to practice with the elements is when you feel stress. If you are arguing with someone or you are upset by a news story or whatever it is, look into the elemental nature of your body and mind. See yourself as these elements. Then ask yourself who is upset? What is upset? How are these elements being threatened?

I have a Dharma sister who once told me how valuable this practice is for her. I did not say anything because I had never gotten much out of it. But finally I began to work with it, and I found it very useful.

This is very common in meditation practice, and this is why you need to return to practices that did not seem useful before. There is always something new to learn. That is what meditation practice is about. Of course, sometimes the mind is not ready for a lesson. You don't start learning mathematics by taking Calculus. When the mind is ready, it will let you know.

Meditation is a lifelong activity. The Buddha did not stop meditating after he became awakened. This practice is like science. A scientist would never say, “OK. I'm done. We know everything.” There is always more to

learn. Some arahants only work with the formless attainments after they are fully awakened. Even for a Buddha, there is more to learn.

In doing the research for this section I ran into many teachings on this subject, most of which I found unsatisfactory. Many of them are incredibly over-analyzed. Notice the Buddha's instructions at the beginning of this section. They are pretty simple and pretty straightforward. Do this practice and see what it yields for you. You may see things that are completely different than what I have described. See what is true for you.

Ayya Khema has a good guided meditation on the elements (Internet search: "[ayya khema four great elements](#)"). Unfortunately, it is cut short near the end, but of the many guided meditations that I listened to on the elements, this is the best one.

5. The Corpse Contemplations

“Again, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally... And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

“Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms, a

bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: 'This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.'

"...That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

"Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews... a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews... a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews...

disconnected bones scattered in all directions - here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh-bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here a rib-bone, there a breast-bone, here an arm-bone, there a shoulder-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull-a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: 'This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.'

"...That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

"Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones bleached white, the color of shells... bones heaped up... bones more than a year old, rotted and crumbled to dust, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: 'This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.'

"In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or he abides contemplating the body as a

body both internally and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in the body its nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that 'there is a body' is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That, too, is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body." - [MN 10.14-31]

These are also called the "cemetery contemplations."

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, this section is labeled "The Nine Charnel Ground Contemplations." In India at the time of the Buddha, if you could not afford a cremation, your body was thrown into a "charnel ground" and left to rot. This provided an opportunity (!) to see what happens to a human body after death. Some monks would spend time living in a charnel ground.

As you can probably guess, this is a very challenging practice. Here we see the body in its barest form. For each of these last few practices - contemplation of body parts, the elements, and now the corpse contemplations - the main purpose is to see clearly the nature of the body. In doing that, we may experience attachment and clinging, fear, and revulsion.

But imagine that you can really come to terms with those emotions. Imagine a life where you are free from fear. Imagine a life where you do not cling to your physical form, your body. Imagine a life where you can look at a corpse and see it with clarity but without revulsion.

To do that you must have a very healthy attitude about life. Instead of being sucked into a whirlpool of negative emotions, you can step back and view life from a greater perspective. You put your life into a larger space.

Here is where a belief in rebirth is very helpful. Rebirth is a topic that everyone must deal with and come to terms with on his or her own. I practiced for 20 years before I dealt seriously with it, and I came to see into its truth.

But I am not going to try to convince you of the truth of rebirth, at least not here. But a more incremental step is to posit that it may be true and to see what that does. How does a belief in rebirth affect your personal health and happiness? How does it affect your practice? Seeing that your own actions influence your future rebirths is certainly an incentive to be serious about them. And also, in the case of the corpse meditation, it can put this life and this body into a larger perspective.

The Buddha's path offers us two possibilities. The first is to be happier in this lifetime and in future lifetimes. The second is to become free from the uncertainty and risk of the rounds of rebirth altogether.

So as you do these contemplations, put them into the space of infinite time. It is like that New Yorker cartoon of the [New Yorker's view of the world](#), where New York is huge, and way off in the distance is this little island called "Japan." That is how we usually look at our lives. Our lives are like New York. Everything else is Japan.

But now zoom back with that lens. Make New York fit into a bigger space. What does your life - New York - look like from the moon? Mars? Pluto? This enormous, overwhelming thing we call "this very life" is now just one of very, very many.

This makes our current life both more and less important. It is more important because we have this priceless opportunity to practice, to make this life and future lives really count for something. It makes this life less important because this is not all there is. This life is part of a very, very long continuum. In the scheme of things it will come and go. Our 80 years, or whatever it is, that we live will disappear in the vastness of time. Five lives from now what happens to this particular body will hardly seem relevant. It will be like a toy we were so attached to as a

child, and now we can hardly remember.

As to the mechanics of doing this practice, it will be hard for most people to visualize the stages of corpse decomposition. Here are the stages as described by the Buddha:

1. "Furthermore, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: 'This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.'"
2. "Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: 'This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.'"
3. "Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews..."
4. "Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, sinews... a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews..."
5. "Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together by sinews..."
6. "Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, disconnected bones scattered in all directions - here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh-bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here a rib-bone, there a breast-bone, here an arm-bone, there a shoulder-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull - "
7. "Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones bleached white, the color of shells..."
8. "Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones heaped up..."
9. "Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a

charnel ground, bones more than a year old, rotted and crumbled to dust, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’”

(In the initial quote some of the passages were omitted. In the listing here, they have been re-inserted.)

And here is the Reader’s Digest version:

1. Body swollen
2. Body devoured by crows
3. Skeleton with flesh and blood
4. Fleshless skeleton smeared with blood
5. Skeleton without flesh and blood
6. Disconnected bones scattered in all directions
7. Bones bleached white
8. Bones heaped up
9. Bones turned to dust

On the Internet, there are photographs of decaying corpses (Internet search: “[buddha cemetery contemplations](#)”). They will not map exactly to the stages of decay the Buddha described, but they are close. However, again, please use good judgment. This is a very advanced practice. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta was addressed to a community of monks. These were people who had already made a big commitment to this practice. Even then, as we have seen, some of the Buddha’s own monks became so repulsed by their bodies that they committed suicide.

This can be a very powerful practice. In Thailand, you can buy photographs of decaying corpses. Monks often buy them and keep them with them. They may put a photograph on the table at mealtime. Although it may be counter-intuitive, this practice can help you to overcome one of the greatest fears that people have, and that is the fear of death.

The Second Foundation of Mindfulness - Feelings

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating feelings as feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, a bhikkhu understands: ‘I feel a pleasant feeling’; when feeling a painful feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a painful feeling’; when feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.’ When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a worldly pleasant feeling’; when feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, he understands: ‘I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling’; when feeling a worldly painful feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a worldly painful feeling’; when feeling an unworldly painful feeling, he understands: ‘I feel an unworldly painful feeling’; when feeling a worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling’; when feeling an unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: ‘I feel an unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.’

“In this way he abides contemplating mind as mind internally, or he abides contemplating mind as mind externally, or he abides contemplating mind as mind both internally and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in mind its nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in mind its nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in mind its nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that ‘there is mind’ is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is

how a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind as mind.” -
[MN 10.32]

Worldly feelings cause sense desire, and guarding the sense doors is a way to abandon it. Unworldly desire is to be cultivated. Unworldly pleasant feelings come from serenity. Unworldly unpleasant feelings motivate us to practice. It is the angst we feel because we feel stress and want to be free from it. Unworldly neutral feelings are the quality of equanimity, which is the primary factor of the fourth jhāna.

Thus, for pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings, each has a worldly aspect and an unworldly aspect. This makes for six types of feelings.

The practice of the second foundation of mindfulness is to be aware of feelings as they arise in the mind. Most of the time we are experiencing neutral worldly feelings. Become sensitive to that. When a pleasant feeling arises, see that. Do likewise for unpleasant feelings. You can use a silent, mental label, like “pleasant.” You can also see what the mind does with it. You can see how the mind takes pleasant feelings and turns them into objects of desire and unpleasant feelings and turns them into objects of aversion.

You can either make this your main practice or make it part of a more general mindfulness practice. You may be doing breath practice, for example, and may notice the feeling tone of a sense contact. See it and return to the breath. Or you may spend the entire sitting just noting feelings.

Likewise, for unworldly sensations, note them as well. In particular, you may notice pleasant sensations like tingling or a moment when the mind gets very quiet and serene. Let these feelings bathe the body.

You can also use this knowledge to cultivate the mind. If you feel unpleasant sensations, look for a place in the body that feels pleasant. If the mind is too highly charged, then look for a place that is neutral, more equanimous. That can make the mind calmer and bring the energy level

down.

This sutta has many stock passages. Each of the practices in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta follows the same formula. The object of meditation is 1) to be contemplated internally, 2) externally, and 3) internally and externally. This contemplation is done, in this case, contemplating “feelings as feelings,” that is, with nothing added. This is sometimes translated as “feelings in and of themselves.”

The next step is 4) to see into the arising and passing away of the object, to see its transient nature. In the case of the body, the body itself will grow old, die, and decompose. In the case of the breath, each breath has a beginning, middle, and an end. In the case of feelings, they come and go like waves on the beach, one feeling giving way to the next.

This leads to the fifth step:

“Or else mindfulness that ‘there is mind’ is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.”

Thānissaro Bhikkhu describes it this way:

This stage corresponds to a mode of perception that the Buddha in MN 121 (Cūḷasuññata Sutta, The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness) terms “entry into emptiness”:

“Thus he regards it [this mode of perception] as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: ‘there is this.’”

This is the culminating equipoise where the path of the practice opens to a state of non-fashioning and from there to the fruit of awakening and release.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "[Maha-satipatthana Sutta: The Great Frames of Reference](#)"]

The Third Foundation of Mindfulness - Mind

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. He understands mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate, and mind unaffected by hate as mind unaffected by hate. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. He understands contracted mind as contracted mind, and distracted mind as distracted mind. He understands exalted mind as exalted mind, and unexalted mind as unexalted mind. He understands surpassed mind as surpassed mind, and unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed mind. He understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind, and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind. He understands liberated mind as liberated mind, and unliberated mind as unliberated mind.

“In this way he abides contemplating mind as mind internally, or he abides contemplating mind as mind externally, or he abides contemplating mind as mind both internally and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in mind its nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in mind its nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in mind its nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that ‘there is mind’ is simply established in him to the extent necessary for

bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind as mind.” - [MN 10.34-35]

The Buddha here gives us mind states to note, most of which are paired:

affected by lust	unaffected by lust
affected by hate	unaffected by hate
affected by delusion	unaffected by delusion
contracted mind	
distracted mind	
exalted mind	unexalted mind
surpassed mind	unsurpassed mind
concentrated mind	unconcentrated mind
liberated mind	unliberated mind

Bhikkhu Bodhi says this about some of the terms:

The paired examples of citta (“mind states”) given in this passage contrast states of mind of wholesome and unwholesome, or developed and undeveloped character. An exception, however, is the pair “contracted” and “distracted,” which are both unwholesome, the former due to sloth and torpor, the latter due to restlessness and remorse. (Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā explains “exalted mind” and “unsurpassed mind” as the mind pertaining to the level of the jhānas and immaterial meditative attainments, and “unexalted mind” and “surpassed mind” as the mind pertaining to the level of sense-sphere

consciousness.) “Liberated mind” must be understood as a mind temporarily and partly freed from defilements through insight or the jhānas. Since the practice of satipaṭṭhāna pertains to the preliminary phase of the path aimed at the supramundane paths of deliverance, this last category should not be understood as a mind liberated through attainment of the supramundane paths.

- [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Introduction]

The Buddha told us to see when any of the three poisons are absent. Usually, we look for what is there. In this case, we are told to see what is missing. This is a key point. When the poisons are missing, that is a mind state to cultivate. It is also a fruit of the practice. It is a reward. See when the practice is working and take satisfaction in that.

As we work toward attaining jhāna, the experiences of the mind as exalted, unsurpassed, and liberated will take on more meaning. This is a sign that the practice is working. It may be inconsistent and sporadic, but it is there. First, you get that old truck started, and then you work on getting it to run smoothly.

As with feelings, you can note these states as they arise, or you can spend your entire sitting noting them. And as with the other foundations of mindfulness, you see them first “in and of themselves,” then “arising and vanishing,” and finally “with bare knowledge and mindfulness, not clinging to anything in the world.”

The Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness - Mind Objects

The fourth foundation of mindfulness is sometimes left untranslated as “dharma” (Pāli: dhamma). The word “dharma” has multiple uses. In its most common use, it literally means “doctrine.” More colloquially it means the teachings of the Buddha. When it is used in that context, the

convention is to capitalize it, a.k.a., “Dharma.”

As previously discussed, the word “dharma” also means how you understand the nature of reality. This, in turn, influences how you behave. You understand the world to be a certain way and then act in a way that is consistent with that understanding. Some dharmas are wholesome and positive, and some are not.

A third meaning for the word “dharma” is “phenomena.” Everything that arises and passes away is a dharma. When the mind is distracted, some sense event triggers the distraction. The distraction arises and passes away. This is a dharma.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness has the most differences in different versions of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Two of the three versions list the hindrances. The Pāli version lists the Four Noble Truths. This does not make any sense to me. Two list the sense spheres, which I think belong to the teaching on dependent co-arising. The Pāli version also lists the aggregates which also does not make sense to me.

What does make sense to me is the Five Hindrances and the Seven Factors of Awakening. The hindrances are to be abandoned; the factors of awakening are to be developed. And that is what I will concentrate on here.

1. The Five Hindrances

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects? Here a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five hindrances. And how does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five hindrances? Here, there being sensual desire in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is sensual desire in me’; or there being no sensual desire in him, he

understands: 'There is no sensual desire in me'; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the abandoning of arisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned sensual desire.'

"There being ill will in him... There being sloth and torpor in him... There being restlessness and remorse in him... There being doubt in him, a bhikkhu understands: 'There is doubt in me'; or there being no doubt in him, he understands: 'There is no doubt in me'; and he understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen doubt, and how there comes to be the abandoning of arisen doubt, and how there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned doubt.

"In this way he abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects internally, or he abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects externally, or he abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects both internally and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in mind-objects their nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in mind-objects their nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in mind-objects their nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that 'there are mind-objects' is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five hindrances." - [MN 10.36-37]

The hindrances were discussed in the section on Problems While

Meditating. Here the most important point is to see them juxtaposed with the factors of awakening. Meditation is commonly taught as a neutral kind of experience, one where you simply note phenomena as they arise and pass away. There certainly is that aspect to meditation. As we have seen in the stock phrase, that is one of the practices that the Buddha advised us to do.

But that is just one aspect to meditation. If that is all there is, you would simply note the arising and passing away of unskillful mind states. You would never develop the path. After all, as the Buddha told us, the path is to be developed:

“This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed.” - [SN 56.11]

Working with the hindrances is not simply a case of seeing them. To be sure, sometimes simply seeing will make them go away. If the hindrance is weak that may happen.

But sometimes the hindrance is strong. We have to apply an antidote. Sometimes we have a “multiple hindrance attack.” Panic can set in. If the first thing you try does not work, try another one. Walking meditation can help when there is a strong hindrance attack. As mentioned in the last section, you can find a place in the body that feels pleasant and let the mind settle there. Change your breathing. Make it slower and deeper. Make it fast and shallow. Make it deep on the in-breath and short on the out-breath. Make it short on the in-breath and long on the out-breath. Invent a new kind of breathing. Practice mettā. Practice sweeping. Try breath counting. You have a lot of tools with which to work. And finally, if nothing else seems to work, then try to simply watch it. Detach yourself from the experience as much as you can. Practice equanimity.

This is a skill. As the Buddha told us, the objective is to abandon the hindrances, not just be with them.

2. The Seven Factors of Awakening

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the Seven Enlightenment Factors. And how does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the Seven Enlightenment Factors? Here, there being the mindfulness enlightenment factor in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is the mindfulness enlightenment factor in me’; or there being no mindfulness enlightenment factor in him, he understands: ‘There is no mindfulness enlightenment factor in me’; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of the unarisen mindfulness enlightenment factor, and how the arisen mindfulness enlightenment factor comes to fulfillment arisen mindfulness enlightenment factor comes to fulfillment by development.

“There being the investigation-of-states enlightenment factor in him... There being the energy enlightenment factor in him... There being the rapture enlightenment factor in him... There being the tranquility enlightenment factor in him... There being the concentration enlightenment factor in him... There being the equanimity enlightenment factor in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is the equanimity enlightenment factor in me’; or there being no equanimity enlightenment factor in him, he understands: ‘There is no equanimity enlightenment factor in me’; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of the unarisen equanimity enlightenment factor, and how the arisen equanimity enlightenment factor comes to fulfillment by development.

“In this way he abides contemplating mind-objects as

mind-objects internally, externally, and both internally and externally... And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the Seven Enlightenment Factors.” - [MN 10.42-43]

Of all the teachings of the Buddha, I think that those on the factors of awakening are the least appreciated and the least often taught. In a nutshell, if you can abandon the hindrances and fully develop the factors of awakening you will be enlightened, or at least on the cusp of it.

The seven factors are divided into three groups depending on the energy level of the mind and body. The factor that is useful regardless of the energy level is:

1. mindfulness

The factors that are most helpful when the mind is sluggish are:

2. investigation of states
3. energy
4. rapture

The factors that are most helpful when the mind is overly active are:

5. tranquility
6. concentration
7. equanimity

1. Mindfulness

“Bhikkhus, on whatever occasion a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world - on that occasion unremitting mindfulness is

established in him. On whatever occasion unremitting mindfulness is established in a bhikkhu - on that occasion the mindfulness enlightenment factor is aroused in him, and he develops it, and by development, it comes to fulfilment in him.” - [MN 118.30]

The meaning of mindfulness was covered in the section on Right Mindfulness in the section on the Four Noble Truths. But perhaps a few more comments are in order at this point.

By now you know a great deal about the Buddha’s teachings. And now, perhaps, you can appreciate the true meaning of mindfulness. Meditation is purposeful activity. When you sit down, it is worth bringing to mind the foundation on which you practice, which is right view. You keep in mind the object of meditation, the practice that you are doing. And you bring to mind your own knowledge and experience, what has worked for you in the past and what has not worked for you. If you are “just sitting” you are doing what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “wasting your time on the cushion.”

Meditation is not just watching the world go by. This is a training. Skillful mind states are to be developed; unskillful mind states are to be abandoned. Your intention must be wholesome. As the Buddha put it, your actions must be rooted in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. Your attention must be fully present, and you must bring energy and ardency to the fore. And for the countless times when those things do not come together and you have to remind yourself to come back to the breath, you do it with love and compassion for yourself. What you are doing has skill and merit.

For a complete description of right mindfulness see Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu’s book *Right Mindfulness*.

2. Investigation of States

“Abiding thus mindful, he investigates and examines that [mind]state with wisdom and embarks upon a full inquiry into it. On whatever occasion, abiding thus mindful, a bhikkhu investigates and examines that state with wisdom and embarks upon a full inquiry into it - on that occasion the investigation-of-states enlightenment factor is aroused in him, and he develops it, and by development it comes to fulfilment in him.” - [MN 118.31]

This passage is rich with meaning. It starts with a context of having established mindfulness. Having done so, one looks at the mind “with wisdom” and “embarks on a full inquiry into it.”

We see that we are not just watching events pass by. We are starting “with wisdom” - right view - and then we are asking questions. What is going on? What activity is asserting itself most strongly? Do we keep coming back to the same thought over and over again? What is that all about?

How is the mind? Is it sluggish? Focused? Calm? Serene? Do I need to make an adjustment? Does the mind need more energy? Less?

Meditation is very much about balance and calibration. What does the mind need? Anything? Perhaps it is focused, calm, and steady. If it is, then keep it there.

Like so many of the Buddha’s instructions, you can actively pursue the investigation-of-states factor or it may arise naturally. Both have value. When it arises naturally, that is something to see. Suddenly what is going on in the mind becomes really interesting. You can play with it and see what happens.

Once when I was on retreat, I had a lot of hip pain. But I was pretty focused at the time, and I started watching the sensations in the hip. Because of the concentration, I was able to cut through the mind’s wanting to make the unpleasant sensations into a big problem. I started

watching the sensations come and go and move around. When the bell rang to end the session, I was so wrapped up in what I was seeing that I just kept sitting.

This is investigation-of-states.

3. Energy

“In one who investigates and examines that state with wisdom and embarks upon a full inquiry into it, tireless energy is aroused. On whatever occasion tireless energy is aroused in a bhikkhu who investigates and examines that state with wisdom and embarks upon a full inquiry into it - on that occasion the energy enlightenment factor is aroused in him, and he develops it, and by development it comes to fulfillment in him.” - [MN 118.32]

This sense of inquiry leads to energy.

Energy is a fascinating topic in Buddhist practice. I once read a story about a Buddhist monk who did not sleep for several years. The Buddha himself is said to have only slept one hour a night. When I first heard these stories, I thought they were urban legend.

But then I went on a long retreat, and by the end of it I was only sleeping six hours a night. I had always needed at least eight hours of sleep a night and often more. I seemed to be OK, but I wasn't sure. This was out of my normal experience. I was concerned because the retreat was ending. I had a long drive ahead of me the next day and work the day after that.

It turned out I was fine. I drove home and even stayed up late that night and was up early the next morning.

One of my favorite Buddhist monks only sleeps two hours a night. This shows the kind of power that a deep meditation practice can have. We spend so much of our lives under stress, and when that stress is greatly reduced, all kinds of things become possible.

Keep the energy balanced. Too much energy is the hindrance of restlessness. Too little is the hindrance of sloth.

Use common sense when dealing with your energy level. When you are restless, consider what you can do about it. Sometimes deep breathing helps. Sometimes short breaths help.

If you are working with a high-energy practice like investigation-of-states, switch to something more calming. Sweeping may help. Simply following the breath may help. Finding your “beautiful breath” may help. Ask yourself, what kind of breathing would feel really good right now?

There may be tension in one part of the body causing restlessness. Try breathing into that area. You can change postures. Some people consider changing postures to be a mortal sin, but if it is done mindfully and in service to your practice, it can be very helpful.

Walking meditation can also help. While walking, try different paces. Start with fast walking if you feel sluggish. If you are restless, sometimes fast walking works well and sometimes slow walking works. See what works for you.

There is a related subject to energy, and that is how long you sit. The convention is to sit for 45 minutes or an hour and to walk for 30-45 minutes.

But during the Buddha’s time they did not do this. They would simply meditate. And there are monasteries that follow the old convention. The meditation period is several hours long. You sit when you want and you walk when you want. They also sometimes use “interval bells.” These may be every hour or every 45 minutes. Personally, I prefer this style.

Granted, it can cause some distractions for the other people in the retreat, but this is an opportunity for you to move silently and for the other meditators to breathe through the sounds.

The advantage to this approach is that it is another way to learn. You may think that three hours is forever, but you may be surprised at how long you can sit with practice and training. I know people who sit this long and longer. And it is actually quite interesting to see the ebbs and flows of practice over a longer period of time.

There is no right or wrong way. You do what works for you. But consider a different way to practice, one that may have some additional challenges but also some additional benefits. If you think you cannot do something, you never will. I was at a retreat once where someone complained that the body is not meant to sit for so many hours every day. But people have been doing it for centuries. Of course, you may have to work your way up to it. I started at five minutes.

In the 1970's the Philadelphia Flyers had a coach named Fred Shero. He was very interested in how the Soviet hockey team trained. He went to the Soviet Union several times to study their methods. But when he first tried to get his players to do the same drills that the Soviet players did, they complained that they were impossible. Nonetheless, after a while, a few of them were able to do them, and later still, all the players could do them.

As for restlessness' counterpart - sloth and torpor - in Problems While Meditating, you may recall that the Buddha gave a whole "Discourse on Dozing" [AN 7:58].

Ultimately, it is up to you to use your wisdom and your own practical understanding of your own mind. No one knows your mind as well as you do. And if you need to splash some water on your face or get some sleep, trust your own discernment and your own best judgment.

4. Rapture

“In one who has aroused energy, unworldly rapture arises. On whatever occasion unworldly rapture arises in a bhikkhu who has aroused energy - on that occasion the rapture enlightenment factor is aroused in him, and he develops it, and by development it comes to fulfillment in him.” - [MN 118.33]

The Pāli word that is translated here as “rapture” is “pīti.” It is also sometimes translated as “joy.” But the literal translation is not as important as the experience of it. Pīti is the technical term for a meditative state, one that is the most important factor of the first jhāna. Note that the Buddha used the phrase “unworldly rapture,” so we know this is a reference to jhāna.

In the next section on concentration, we will discuss how to enter the first jhāna. But for now, simply know that this is where we are headed. As the mind becomes calmer, the thought-making process will slow down. Thoughts will become a mere whisper. This will manifest in the body as an energy flow. You may feel tingling and pleasant sensations. This will flood over the whole body. This is the experience of pīti in the first jhāna. It is one of the fruits of practice.

5. Tranquility

“In one who is rapturous, the body and the mind become tranquil. On whatever occasion the body and the mind become tranquil in a bhikkhu who is rapturous - on that occasion the tranquility enlightenment factor is aroused in him, and he develops it, and by development it comes to fulfillment in him.” - [MN 118.34]

By now we are immersed in the world of jhāna, meditative absorption. Rapture is highly energized. Different people experience it differently. People who need this type of positive experience will have very strong

rapture, perhaps overwhelmingly so. For others, it will be milder.

This highly energized state can be quite exhausting. It is like when you laugh a lot. At first it feels good, but after a while you are just worn out.

In the first jhāna, the hindrances disappear. You can look for them but you will not find them. To be sure, this is a conditioned state, so when you leave jhāna the hindrances will return. But it is a taste of the possibilities that come with a full awakening.

You may recall that in the Buddha's description of dependent co-arising, in the reverse chain that leads to liberation, rapture is a proximate cause of tranquility:

"...with rapture as proximate cause, tranquility;" - [SN 12.23]

The overly energized state of pīti fades. This leads to a much calmer state of mind. You may experience a profound stillness, contentment, and happiness:

Tranquility, by removing the subtle bodily and mental disturbances connected with gladness and rapture, brings the serene pleasure that prepares the mind for deepened concentration.

- [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Introduction]

And tranquility leads to concentration.

6. Concentration

"In one whose body is tranquil and who feels pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated. On whatever occasion the mind becomes concentrated in a bhikkhu whose body

is tranquil and who feels pleasure — on that occasion the concentration enlightenment factor is aroused in him, and he develops it, and by development it comes to fulfilment in him.” - [MN 118.35]

The Pāli word for “concentration” is “samādhi.” While “right concentration” refers to jhāna, samādhi is often translated as a state of mind that is “one-pointed” (i.e, “singleness of mind”). However, the definition of “one-pointedness” goes back to Buddhaghosa and *The Visuddhimagga*, which would, of course, mean that it refers to the Visuddhimagga style of jhāna. As numerous translators point out, the word “samadhi” literally means “to collect” or “bring together” or “gathering”:

In the vocabulary of Buddhist meditation, the word “jhāna” is closely connected with another word, “Samadhi,” generally rendered by “concentration.” “Samadhi” derives from the prefixed verbal root “sam-a-dha,” meaning to collect or to bring together, thus suggesting the concentration or unification of the mind. - [Gunaratana, Henepola, “[The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation](#)”]

This would indicate more of the broad-based concentration that is indicated elsewhere in the Pāli Canon. This is sometimes called “unification of awareness,” as in the following translation. It is a factor of the second jhāna:

“And further, the monk, with the stilling of directed thoughts and evaluations, enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation — internal assurance. This monk is said to have blinded Māra. Trackless, he has destroyed Māra’s vision and has become invisible to the Evil One.” -

[MN 26.35]

A point that I have made elsewhere is that I think in English we try to make our terms very precise. But my impression of Pāli and the Pāli Canon specifically is that the terms are meant to be used more loosely. In this case, for example, concentration could mean the second jhāna or jhāna generally.

And finally, concentration leads to the quality of equanimity, which is a factor of the third and fourth jhānas.

7. Equanimity

“He closely looks on with equanimity at the mind thus concentrated. On whatever occasion a bhikkhu closely looks on with equanimity at the mind thus concentrated — on that occasion the equanimity enlightenment factor is aroused in him, and he develops it, and by development it comes to fulfilment in him.” - [MN 118.36]

Equanimity is a liberated state. It is a taste of the promise of full awakening. The mind is free of the tug-of-war between craving and aversion. The mind can sit calmly in the midst of experience. You see how much stress craving and aversion create. And apropos of the need for sleep, once you are not spending your entire day burning up energy from stress, the mind does not need as much rest.

“Again, with the fading away as well of rapture, a bhikkhu abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna, on account of which noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’ This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...

“Again, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...” - [MN 26.36-37]

Summary

In this chapter we looked at the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

1. The body.
2. Feelings.
3. The mind.
4. Mind-objects (dharmas).

For the body, we discussed five practices:

1. Mindfulness of breathing
2. Mindfulness of postures
3. Mindfulness of body parts
4. Mindfulness of the elements
5. The corpse contemplations

We discussed the six types of feelings, that worldly feelings are to be guarded, and unworldly feelings are to be cultivated.

We discussed the nine unwholesome mind states that are to be abandoned and the seven wholesome mind states to be cultivated.

Finally, we discussed the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, “mind-objects,” or “dharmas.” We concentrated on the hindrances, which are to be abandoned, and the factors of awakening, which are to be cultivated.

Mindfulness of Breathing

“Bhikkhus, when mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it fulfills the four foundations of mindfulness. When the four foundations of mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they fulfill the Seven Enlightenment Factors. When the Seven Enlightenment Factors are developed and cultivated, they fulfill true knowledge and deliverance.” - [MN 118.15]

The “Ānāpānasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing” [MN 118] is the Buddha’s most complete discourse on meditation. “Sati” is “mindfulness” in Pāli, and “ānāpāna” means “breathing.”

The Ānāpānasati Sutta has similarities in form and structure to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Like the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it has four sections: the body, feelings, the mind, and dharmas. In the Ānāpānasati Sutta, these sections are called “tetrads” because each one is a set of four contemplations. Thus there are 16 total contemplations in the sutta:

1. Contemplation of the body
 1. Breathing long
 1. Breathing short
 1. Experiencing the whole body
 1. Tranquilizing the bodily activities
2. Contemplation of feelings
 1. Experiencing rapture
 1. Experiencing pleasure
 1. Experiencing mental activities
 1. Tranquilizing mental activities
3. Contemplation of the mind
 1. Experiencing the mind

1. Gladdening the mind
1. Concentrating the mind
1. Liberating the mind
4. Contemplation of dharmas
 1. Contemplating impermanence
 1. Contemplating fading away
 1. Contemplating cessation
 1. Contemplating relinquishment

Before we go through each of these contemplations, I would like to emphasize some points made earlier. First of all, this list is given in a linear fashion, one through sixteen. That is one way to look at them, and there is a certain value in doing them in order.

However, as has often been noted, the Buddha's teachings are holographic. You can start at any point in the Buddha's teachings, and eventually you will cover everything (if you keep at it). In terms of practice, you may find that suddenly one of these contemplations arises of its own accord, or in doing these practices you find one that is particularly helpful or useful.

Some people feel that it is important to do these in the order given. Others argue just as strongly that you should practice in a way that lets them arise naturally. Personally, I think that both ways of practicing have value, and both have weaknesses.

As to letting them arise naturally, I think it is very difficult to see them if you have not had some experience with them. It is worthwhile to spend a sitting doing each of the sixteen contemplations for five or ten minutes. This helps you become familiar with all of them and helps to keep them fresh in your mind.

On the other hand, sometimes one of them will arise. This happens on and off of the cushion.

Thus, there are different approaches. The first is to use these practices in a linear, formal way. Do them one through sixteen and see where that

takes you.

Then there is the non-linear approach. You can just pick one contemplation and see what happens. Do it for one sitting, or a week, or a month, perhaps longer.

Or you can do the one that feels most useful in the moment. In order to do this, you watch the mind and bring discernment to the fore. You ask questions about what will be most useful at the moment.

This is an important teaching. If you do just two things in your practice, cultivate virtue and practice mindfulness with breathing, these will take you a very long way. They may even take you to a final awakening.

Breathing With the Body

“And how, bhikkhus, is mindfulness of breathing developed and cultivated, so that it is of great fruit and great benefit?”

“Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

“Breathing in long, he understands: ‘I breathe in long’; or breathing out long, he understands: ‘I breathe out long.’ Breathing in short, he understands: ‘I breathe in short’; or breathing out short, he understands: ‘I breathe out short.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body [of breath]’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body [of breath].’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily

formation.'" - [MN 118.16-17]

This passage should have a familiar feel to it by now. The four exercises here are as follows:

1. Know the short breath.
2. Know the long breath.
3. Experience the whole body.
4. Tranquilize the whole body.

The first two contemplations move from a simple awareness of breath, a change in focus that happens quite naturally. Most commentators agree it meant more than long and short here; he was talking about all the qualities of breath. As we become more familiar with breathing, we perceive subtle nuances in it.

Sometimes the breath is very fine, like silk or satin; it enters and exits freely. How wonderful just to be breathing! At other times it is coarse, more like burlap; it fights its way in out. Sometimes the breath is so deep and smooth that it affects the whole body, relaxing us profoundly. Other times it is so short and pinched, hurried and agitated, that our minds and bodies are like that, restless and uncomfortable.

- [Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath*]

The first two contemplations are the only ones where the Buddha told us to simply be with the experience. In the third contemplation, we expand our field of awareness to encompass the entire body. This third contemplation is sometimes called "the breath body." What we are aiming at is not simply to experience the physical body but the entire energy field. What we nominally call the "breath" is really the breath energy. You can feel the breath energy anywhere in the body. You can

breathe in and out through any place in the body. You have already been encouraged to try different spots in the body, like the chakras. See which ones are most prominent for you.

As you work with this exercise, look for places where the breath energy feels blocked. The sweeping exercises are good for that. As you move through the body, wherever there are sources of stress or tension, breathe through those areas. Eventually, the energy will flow freely and easily. You will feel the breath energy field of the whole body on the in-breath and the out-breath.

Experiment with this. As you breathe in, feel the breath energy fill the whole body. On the out-breath, breathe out through one spot, or breathe out through the entire body. Feel the breath energy as a cocoon that envelops the physical body. A sense of ease and comfort will follow.

When the breath energy flows through the entire body you fulfill the fourth contemplation. The body will be calm, and the mind will follow the ease of the body.

Breathing With Feelings

“He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing rapture’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing rapture.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing pleasure’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing pleasure.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the mental formation’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing the mental formation.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in tranquilizing the mental formation’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out tranquilizing the mental formation.’” - [MN 118.19]

Joy is used in a number of different contexts in the Buddha’s teaching. Until you attain jhāna, joy will be the joy of the practice. But

“joy/rapture/bliss” is also the primary factor of the first jhāna. In the first tetrad we calm the whole body, getting the field of breath energy to be open, feeling the whole breath body as it pulses in and out. When that happens, pleasant feelings pervade the body. As you continue to breathe in and out, the pleasant sensations fill the whole body. When the pleasant sensations are very strong, you enter the first jhāna.

Joy will eventually settle down into pleasantness or “happiness” (Pāli: sukka). There is serenity, peace, and calm. And this is the next contemplation. The mind will be quieter. It may even become completely still. This happiness is the primary quality of the second jhāna.

These steps do not necessarily happen sequentially, and they may happen in stages. With all of these practices, simply do the best that you can. Here and there you will get a taste of the possibilities. You will have a brief moment where the body is calm and serene and the mind is quiet. This often happens when you are not trying to make it happen. If you back off the conscious effort, you will naturally fall into these states.

The next two contemplations follow the pattern of the first tetrad. In the first tetrad, we experience the whole body and then calm the whole body. Here we open to “mental formations.” Both Larry Rosenberg and Thānissaro Bhikkhu agree that what is meant here are the two aggregates: feelings (vedanā) and perceptions (sañña).

A good way to do the seventh contemplation is by sweeping. But in this case, instead of calming the body, note the feeling tone at each location. What do you feel at the shoulder? Is it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? Does it change from breath to breath? If it is unpleasant, can you change your breathing to make it more comfortable?

Also, see if there is any pīti or sukka. Is there an “unworldly” pleasant sensation? And what does the mind do with these sensations?

Then see what the mind does with feelings. What comes next? See how the mind goes from sense input to feeling to perception to thought, and before the feeling how the mind chooses to turn to a particular sense

input. There is a choice about what gets attention. Your mind cannot process every sense input, so it chooses.

Watch for the process of perception. See how the mind takes the sense input and names it. Car. Airplane. Wind. Sometimes you will hear a common sound like a bird chirping, and for just the slightest moment the brain cramps up and we don't recognize the sound. Our perception has taken a microscopically brief holiday. Then the mind snaps back and you think "bird," and for a moment you wonder what that was all about.

Another type of perception is judgment. The word "judgment" is a little problematic. There is a difference between "judgment" and "being judgmental." There is good judgment. This is judgment that comes from wisdom and discernment. There is bad judgment. This is usually rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion.

Then there is "being judgmental." This is being hypercritical and turning everything into like and dislike, good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant. This is an excellent way to suffer. The less critical you are, the more you see things according to their characteristics. You see how you experience those characteristics: hot and mild, sweet and sour, and so forth. This is simply seeing the nature of things, or at least your experience of things.

The objective in the eighth contemplation is to be aware of feelings and perceptions and then to dial them back a bit, to soften them, to "tranquilize" them. Sweeping is also excellent for this step. The Buddha is walking us through a process of abandoning stress and agitation, toward a calmer, happier state of mind. Quietly your wisdom and your ability to discern grow as well. Mundane as well as transcendent insights will arise. It is like an agitated pond of water becoming still. The water becomes clear, and you can see to the bottom.

"...there comes an occasion when [a bhikkhu's] mind becomes internally steady, composed, unified, and concentrated. Then the path is generated in him. He pursues this path, develops it, and cultivates it. As he is

pursuing, developing, and cultivating this path, the fetters are abandoned and the underlying tendencies are uprooted.” - [AN 4.170]

Breathing With the Mind

“He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the mind’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out experiencing the mind.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in gladdening the mind’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out gladdening the mind.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in concentrating the mind’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out concentrating the mind.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in liberating the mind’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out liberating the mind.’” - [MN 118.20]

The ninth contemplation of experiencing the mind is very powerful. Most people spend their lives without any awareness of what is going on in their minds. Life for them is a simple case of reactivity and habit. They never exercise any choice over what is arising in the mind.

The ninth contemplation invites us to look inward and watch what is going on. You step aside and watch your mind from a more clinical perspective. We have already seen this in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta where the Buddha invited us to look at our minds and ask, “Where is the mind now?” Is there lust or not? Is there hatred and aversion or not? Is there delusion and confusion or not? Is the mind exalted, unsurpassed, concentrated, liberated?

Seeing the mind gives us an opportunity to break the habitual, reactive way in which we normally operate. Someone cuts you off in traffic. You see the anger arise and you can let it pass. You can see that you do not have to let the anger control what happens next. You may even be able to conjure up some love and compassion for the other driver. You can see how that person has to live with uncontrolled aggression and how much

stress that causes them.

Another good question to ask is, “What is the mind telling me?” Remember our committee, the Chicago city council? Which member is speaking at the moment? What is that committee member telling us? Is it working us into a frenzy over some imagined slight? Is it telling us to indulge our craving and our greed? Is it telling us to be patient, kind, and generous?

This topic was mentioned before, but it is worth repeating here. In the “Dvedhāvitakka Sutta: The Two Kinds of Thought” [MN 19], the Buddha described a moment during his quest for awakening when he decided to divide his thoughts into two categories:

“Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, it occurred to me: ‘Suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes. Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of cruelty, and I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of non-cruelty.’” - [MN 19.2]

You can think of this more generally as asking the question, “Is this thought of benefit to me and others?” If it is not, then you should abandon it:

“This leads to my own affliction, to others’ affliction, and to the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from nibbāna.’ When I considered: ‘This leads to my own affliction,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This leads to others’ affliction,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This leads to the affliction of both,’ it subsided in me; when I considered: ‘This obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from nibbāna,’ it subsided in me.” - [MN 19.3]

Conversely, if the thought is of benefit to you and others, you should develop and support it:

“This does not lead to my own affliction, or to others’ affliction, or to the affliction of both; it aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, and leads to nibbāna.” - [MN 19.8]

This is a deeply profound insight by the Buddha, and it shows his pragmatism. He is asking a simple question, “Is this thought beneficial or not?”

Most people get hung up on the idea of right and wrong. The Buddha asked a very different question. Is this thought useful? Suppose all politicians in the world starting asking that question? Suppose instead of perpetuating fear and hatred generation after generation, arguing over old slights, real and imagined, they starting asking where does that lead? What does it get you?

The issue of right and wrong goes away. The real question is, “What is the benefit?” If there is no benefit, then abandon it.

There are many aspects to this ninth contemplation. In addition to seeing the general state of the mind, you can look even more deeply into its processes. Watch your thoughts as they arise. With skill, you can see them arise and pass away. You can learn to cut them off, to stop them in mid-track. Even prior to the thought you can see the energy that precipitates the thought, and then you can keep it from manifesting. You can see how energies in the body precipitate thoughts.

As this happens and as you get more skillful, you can depersonalize thinking. You see that thoughts are simply thoughts. They are not “me.” The mind has a mind of its own, but you do not have to be a slave to it. You don’t have to do what it is telling you to do.

With this contemplation, we can turn the old way of thinking and reacting into a more skillful process of thinking, seeing, and evaluating.

Is this thought useful or not? Do I want to keep it and act on it or do I want to throw it away? We are beginning to reclaim control over our lives.

The Buddha told us to work with these mind states, cultivating the wholesome ones and abandoning the unwholesome ones. Many times we can't do that, yet. And that is fine. Again, do not use this as an exercise in frustration. See the thought, and if it is unwholesome see if you can work with it. But if you can't right now, that is fine. Just seeing it puts you well ahead of the game. If all else fails, just be with it. This will at least take some of the energy out of it.

On the positive side of things, you support and enhance the really good thoughts. You don't let them pass you by. You see how much happier the mind is when it is working in a wholesome, virtuous way. These thoughts will manifest more and more, and your own happiness increases directly as a result. And this leads to the tenth contemplation, "gladdening the mind."

When people are first introduced to the idea that you can make your mind happy, it usually raises a few eyebrows. The implication is that you can somehow turn on a switch and go from being stressed to happy. And that is pretty much what it is.

You should work with this exercise however it works for you. As you work with the breath, find a way of breathing that is calm and relaxed. That pleasant feeling permeates the whole body. And you can turn to that pleasant way of breathing whenever you want. This is insight working with concentration. You are more self-aware, so you can see when the mind is in a negative, unwholesome mind state. Then you apply the pleasant breath, and you can immediately feel a slight uplifting in the mind. Everything relaxes a notch or two.

This also plays into dependent co-arising. You are catching the mind in a negative state. This prevents the mind from going into a negative feedback loop where the mind goes deeper and deeper into the abyss.

You break the feedback loop.

Gladdening the mind works very well off the cushion. During the day you can catch the mind in an unwholesome state and apply conscious breathing. Usually these are mildly negative states (a.k.a. “grumpy mind”), and being just mildly negative they lend themselves particularly well to uplifting.

It is difficult to do this if the mind is deeply anxious or very angry. But another benefit to what we are doing is that the strength and frequency of unwholesome mind states diminishes.

It is also worth saying something about deeply troubled states like depression. There are some teachers who think that meditation is a panacea for everything that ails you. They are particularly adamant about not using medications for psychological problems. I think this is a very dangerous position. Conditions like depression must be taken very seriously. If you need medication or psychotherapy or whatever else is required, then do it.

Meditation is often used in the West as a form of psychotherapy. Depending on the issue, it can be helpful for that. But meditation and therapy have different aims. The purpose of therapy is to help people who are having trouble functioning in the world and making them functional. That is a noble goal. For people who are not functioning, becoming functional is extremely important.

But you can be functional and still have a lot of stress and suffering. The Buddha is helping us to see the deeply rooted suffering that is caused by clinging. The purpose of meditation is to free you entirely from stress and suffering.

But you have to get there one step at a time. The Buddha taught “the gradual approach to awakening”:

The main paradigm for the gradual training found in the Majjhima Nikāya is that laid out in MN 27 and MN 51;

alternative versions are found at MN 38, MN 39, MN 53, MN 107, and MN 125, and some of the more important variations will be briefly noted. The sequence opens with the appearance of a Tathāgata in the world and his exposition of the Dhamma, hearing which the disciple acquires faith and follows the Teacher into homelessness. Having gone forth, he undertakes and observes the rules of discipline that promote the purification of conduct and livelihood. The next three steps - contentment, restraint of the sense faculties, and mindfulness and full awareness - are intended to internalize the process of purification and thereby bridge the transition from virtue to concentration. Alternative versions (MN 39, MN 53, MN 107, MN 125) insert two additional steps here, moderation in eating and devotion to wakefulness.

- [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Introduction]

You can see how his system of training proceeds step by step. This is growing a garden. Your practice will grow at its own pace, just as seeds grow and bare fruit as time and circumstances dictate. You start where you are, and if that means taking medication or going into therapy, then that is what you do. Be your own best friend.

The next two steps are “concentrating the mind” and “liberating the mind.” Anytime the word “concentration” is used, it means *jhāna*. I think concentration here refers to the third *jhāna*, although it may mean any of the material *jhānas*. The reason I think this means the third *jhāna* is because we have already seen the first two *jhānas*. And the twelfth contemplation is liberating the mind. This, as I understand it, means the fourth *jhāna*. The primary quality of the fourth *jhāna* is equanimity, and equanimity is liberating.

However, even without being in a state of *jhāna*, you can still work with these two exercises. Just get as concentrated as you can and then focus on

equanimity. See phenomena arise and let them be. Do your best to not chase after pleasure and to avoid pain.

Also, apropos of practicing without attaining jhāna, Larry Rosenberg translates the eleventh contemplation as “steadying the mind.” That may be a more helpful way to think of it until you are able to attain jhāna.

By the time you have mastered the twelfth contemplation the mind is well prepared to delve into dharmas.

Breathing With Dharmas

“He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating impermanence’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating impermanence.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating fading away’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating fading away.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating cessation’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating cessation.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in contemplating relinquishment’; he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out contemplating relinquishment.’” - [MN 118.21]

The Yaksa asked, “What is the most wonderful thing?”

Yudhisthira Maharaj replied, “The most wonderful thing is that although everyday innumerable humans and their animals go to the abode of death, still a man thinks he is immortal.”

- [[Mahabharata, Meditation 128: The Lake of Death](#)]

Larry Rosenberg calls the fourth tetrad “breathing with wisdom.” We are now in the realm of the transcendent teachings of the Buddha.

The thirteenth contemplation is impermanence - annica - which we discussed in the Three Characteristics. Now we look at it more deeply. This is the primary object of our meditation. Now we take the idea of impermanence and experience it directly.

Everything in life is impermanent. Yet we live as if that is not the case. We treat our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and our bodies as if they have some permanent essence. Even our consciousness is conditioned and constantly changing. And trying to cling to something that is impermanent is like grabbing at a wave in order to stop from drowning.

In order to be free from the delusions of impermanence, we have to see deeply how it works, and we have to see how our mind insists on clinging to impermanent things.

You can work with impermanence in many ways. In daily life, you can begin to see the impermanence of everything. Your house? Will it be there in 100 years, 1,000 years? Your car, especially a new one? It is an old, beat-up car waiting to happen.

This does not mean that impermanent phenomena cannot bring you joy and happiness. Just because a flower will only bloom for a short time doesn't mean that you can't enjoy it. In fact, its impermanence is part of the joy. Enjoy the new car. Just know that in the ebb and flow of life it will have its day, and then that day will be over.

Note again this message of the Buddha: the problem is clinging. If you let go of the clinging, you can still enjoy the new car. It is even more enjoyable because the enjoyment is not rooted in delusion.

Adapting to impermanence is like body surfing. You go with the flow, literally. And this makes the dance of life less stressful. We stop pitting ourselves against the universe. Usually we are contending with the world around us. That is like standing in the waves and letting them beat down on us. That is how we usually live. Body surfing is a lot more fun.

We are born into this world, and someday we will die. That makes each

moment even more precious. It is a reminder not to waste our time.

Another way to work with impermanence is to go back through the previous twelve contemplations and look at each one in terms of impermanence. Even the jhānas are conditioned. They arise and pass away. The breath arises and passes away. Thoughts arise and pass away. Feelings arise and pass away. You may recall that in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, for each Foundation of Mindfulness one of the instructions is to contemplate the arising and vanishing of each one. For the body:

“Or else he abides contemplating in the body its nature of arising, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of vanishing, or he abides contemplating in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing.” - [MN 10.5]

Here we have a reformulation of the same exercise. The exercise here is to see everything in terms of its impermanence.

The next three contemplations are leading us step-by-step to final release, to final liberation, to freedom from suffering. Of course, that is a tall order and not likely to happen for some time. Still, you can get a taste of that freedom. You can fake it until you can make it, as the saying goes. You can hover around that territory. In everything you have learned so far, this is the first time that we have broached the experience of awakening. It is now time to poke around that territory and see what we can learn.

In order to see deeply into the impermanent nature of phenomena, the mind must be still. If the mind moves all the time, you cannot see into the impermanence of phenomena. It is like trying to look through a vibrating telescope.

This stillness is deep and profound:

Try to be mindful, and let things take their course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a still

forest pool. All kinds of wonderful animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

- [Ajahn Chah, *A Still Forest Pool*]

This experience of stillness may feel a little frightening at first. It threatens the dysfunctional members of the committee. They can't go there, and they are going to resist. All of our neurotic conditions and habits are under attack; they are not going to go lightly.

Tap into the feeling of deep inner peace that comes with this stillness. Play past any anxiety or fear that comes up and find the deep satisfaction in stillness. There is a deep, profound contentment there. Find it. Tap into it. Savor it.

Larry Rosenberg says that silence is very shy. It will go away at the slightest provocation. So we have to guard it like a rare jewel. We have to create the space in which it can arise. Forceful effort will not work here. The effort must be very gentle and very soft. It is like enticing a wild animal to trust you enough so that it will eat from your hand.

When you can do this, even for the briefest moment, you get a sense of the possibilities of this practice. Now you can see the futility of chasing after sense pleasures, which are completely unreliable.

In the "Māgandiya Sutta: To Māgandiya" [MN 75] the Buddha gave the rather graphic simile of a leper who used coals from a charcoal pit to cauterize his sores. Later, that leper became cured of his leprosy, and he saw another leper doing the same thing. The Buddha then rhetorically asked if the cured leper would envy the uncured leper for "his burning charcoal pit or his use of medicine?"

"Suppose, Māgandiya, there was a leper with sores and

blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a burning charcoal pit. Then his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a physician to treat him. The physician would make medicine for him, and by means of that medicine the man would be cured of his leprosy and would become well and happy, independent, master of himself, able to go where he likes. Then two strong men would seize him by both arms and drag him towards a burning charcoal pit. What do you think, Māgandiya? Would that man twist his body this way and that?" - [MN 75.15]

In other words, what the man at one time sought as a cure for his pain, he now sees as frightening and repulsive.

This is what we are aiming toward, to replace the crude, risky, and dangerous pursuit of sense pleasures with the unworldly pleasure of concentration and meditation. This is not the final goal, but it is an intermediate milestone on the path to awakening. We are replacing sense pleasures with the pleasure born of seclusion.

"So too, Māgandiya, in the past sensual pleasures were painful to touch, hot, and scorching; in the future sensual pleasures will be painful to touch, hot, and scorching; and now at present sensual pleasures are painful to touch, hot, and scorching. But these beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, who burn with fever for sensual pleasures, have faculties that are impaired; thus, though sensual pleasures are actually painful to touch, they acquire a mistaken perception of them as pleasant." - [MN 75.16]

The fourteenth contemplation follows naturally as we see the futility of seeking happiness through what is inconstant and unreliable:

“Householder, suppose a vulture, a heron, or a hawk seized a piece of meat and flew away, and then vultures, herons, and hawks pursued it and pecked and clawed it. What do you think, householder? If that vulture, heron, or hawk does not quickly let go of that piece of meat, wouldn’t it incur death or deadly suffering because of that?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

“So too, householder, a noble disciple considers thus: ‘Sensual pleasures have been compared to a piece of meat by the Blessed One; they provide much suffering and much despair, while the danger in them is great.’ Having seen this thus as it actually is with proper wisdom... clinging to the material things of the world utterly ceases without remainder.” - [MN 54.16]

The fourteenth contemplation is fading away. What is fading away is the clinging, and as a result, stress and suffering.

There are two possible reactions to suffering in life. One is confusion and despair. The other is a determination to find a way out. You have deep faith and deep conviction that there is a solution to the problem.

This is what the Buddha did. He left a life of luxury. He endured countless, often excruciating experiences in order to find an answer. He had an unshakeable conviction that an answer existed. We have the benefit of his experience. He had to do it all on faith and determination.

The inimitable Robert Thurman says, “Wouldn’t it have been a bummer if after all that effort the Buddha found out that ultimately life really is

just hopeless?”

“...when the Buddha attained enlightenment, [it] means ... that he came to understand the nature of reality precisely, exactly, and thoroughly.

“...[he could have] come to the exact understanding of reality and [gone], Oh no, what a bummer! Oh, that’s really awful! I mean, that’s what we might suspect reality is: a bummer. We’re all scared of that.

“So the discovery on which Buddhism is based is that the nature of reality itself is bliss: it is happiness. The world is made of happiness. It is the fabric of the world. Nirvāṇa of the Four Noble Truths: nirvāṇa is the one that is actually real.”

- [Robert Thurman, “[Aurora Forum at Stanford University, 24 April 2008](#)”]

All that we have done and all that we are doing is to see into the futility of clinging to what is impermanent, inconstant, and unreliable. The reason that it has taken us so long to get to even discussing this topic, much less being able to realize it through direct experience, is because our conditioning and habits are so deeply ingrained the other way. What could be more obvious than the fact that good food, sex, happy relationships, lovely music, etc., are the keys to a happy life? This is a very hard sell. We have to see deeply into why this is a bad strategy.

It isn’t that you cannot enjoy these things. But if there is clinging, that is going to be quite a problem. And our mind, which after all has a mind of its own, has to be convinced that a) clinging to sense pleasures is a bad strategy, and b) there is something better.

As our practice deepens, those sense pleasures are going to look less enticing. They may even look dangerous and full of risk. We are trying to

grow up and mature. We are trying to see a way of attaining happiness that surpasses the child-like.

As strategies for happiness go, this is the graded scale:

1. sense pleasures - poor
2. jhāna (meditative absorption) - better
3. nirvāṇa (nibbāna) - best

The more we see into the inconstancy of phenomena, the more the clinging will fade away. Cultivating the thirteenth contemplation will naturally lead to the fourteenth. Our clinging will fade away. We lose interest. The Buddha used the word “dispassion”:

The last four contemplations are like the slow-motion movie. In actual practice, if you have been sitting long enough to reach this point, they might happen quite rapidly, because they're almost the same thing. The Buddha slows them down to see their subtle nuances. The key to them all is number thirteen. If you see into impermanence in a profound way, the others follow quite naturally.

The keyword in the fourteenth contemplation is rendered as “fading away,” But the word in Pāli is “viraga” and is sometimes rendered “becoming dispassionate.” Your passion to cling to things, to attached to them, diminishes. The wording in the fifteenth contemplation is even more difficult. The Pāli word “nirodha” is sometimes used as a synonym for nirvāṇa. A literal translation would be “unbinding.” The unbinding of the mind from greed, hatred, and delusion. It denotes the distinguishing of the fire. This contemplation has to do with cessation, which can be seen in this context as a form of liberation.

- [Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath*]

Cessation is not annihilation. What is ceasing is clinging and craving and the resultant stress/suffering/dukkha. It is the Third Noble Truth. The cessation of stress comes in stages. It is not an all-or-nothing proposition. How much suffering ceases will depend on the depth of our practice. But once again, we see how the path is not all-or-nothing. It happens gradually, i.e., the gradual training. This is good news. It means that you see how stress is lessening, and happiness and liberation are increasing as your skill increases. It is a positive feedback loop.

Finally, we reach the final step on the path, relinquishment. It is the process of letting go. You let go because there is nothing to hold on to.

What is there to let go of? you might ask, since the fifteenth contemplation saw the cessation of the formation. But in the fourteenth and fifteenth contemplations, it is still possible for a self to be present, watching these processes and taking credit for the wise discernment it sees with such subtlety and depth. In the sixteenth, that last vestige of self disappears and there is just the seeing. You relinquish any trace of ownership and give up any clinging whatsoever, even to the practice itself.

- [Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath*]

The Buddha ended this discourse by describing how Mindfulness of Breathing fulfills the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Seven Enlightenment (awakening) Factors, and the “Fulfillment of True Knowledge and Deliverance.” I mention this because there are those who say that there is no relationship between the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Ānāpānasati Sutta. They say that the similarities are coincidental. A teacher at a retreat told me this. But not only can you see that there is a great deal of interweaving between the two, the Buddha himself stated

that Mindfulness of Breathing fulfills the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

The Buddha's teachings are multi-dimensional. They are quite rich, and there is a temptation to over-simplify what he is trying to get us to "keep in mind." This is one reason why the second factor of awakening - investigation/curiosity - is so important. Think of the thing that you find most interesting in life. You probably know quite a lot about it. You know a lot about it because you find it interesting.

When I was in high school, I knew a group of guys who were pretty unengaged when it came to anything intellectual or academic. But when we hit our teenage years, they got really interested in cars. They used to go to the local drag strip and race on Saturdays. Some of them started racing stock cars. They could tell you anything about cars. They could rebuild transmissions and carburetors, they could bore out an engine block and put in bigger pistons, they knew how to make engines faster, they knew all the rules for sportsman and modified class stock cars, what you could and could not legally do to an engine. So how did this otherwise intellectually unengaged group get so knowledgeable and so highly skilled when it came to what is an amazingly complex machine, the automobile? They loved it. They were engaged. They were interested in everything about cars.

This practice may, at times, seem quite complex. But you do not have to be a geographer to make a trip across the country. You just have to know how to follow a map. You just have to follow the directions. This isn't about having a high IQ. It is about having a big heart.

This principle was brought home to me some years ago when I taught a ten-week introduction to vipassana meditation. The group included two Ph.D.'s with the special interest in Buddhism and an intense Marxist from Yugoslavia with a Ph.D. in political science. The Marxist made his attitude toward religion clear: it was a subject for idiots. He was learning meditation because his

girlfriend had raved about it and he was afraid he'd lose her if he didn't show some interest. The Buddhists, on the other hand, were quite reverent.

At the end of the ten weeks, the Marxist had done beautifully, growing inwardly a great deal because he had followed the instructions and practiced every day. The Buddhist scholars, on the other hand, had gotten nowhere. They had tremendous interest in the Buddha's mind but very little in their own. The whole point of meditation was lost on them.

- [Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath*]

Summary

In this chapter, we looked at the Buddha's teaching on ānāpānasati, mindfulness of breathing. He divided mindfulness of breathing into four "tetrads":

1. The body
2. Feelings
3. The mind
4. Dharmas

The contemplations of the body are:

1. Breathing long
2. Breathing short
3. Experiencing the whole body
4. Tranquilizing the bodily activities

The contemplations of feelings are:

1. Experiencing rapture
2. Experiencing pleasure

3. Experiencing mental activities
4. Tranquilizing mental activities

The contemplations of the mind are:

1. Experiencing the mind
2. Gladdening the mind
3. Concentrating the mind
4. Liberating the mind

And the contemplations of dharmas are:

1. Contemplating impermanence
2. Contemplating fading away
3. Contemplating cessation
4. Contemplating relinquishment

V. Right Concentration

The Material Attainments

“And what, friends, is right concentration? Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and abides in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration. With the fading away as well of rapture, he abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna, on account of which noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’ With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity. This is called right concentration.” - [MN 141.31]

At the heart of the Buddha’s training is the practice of jhāna, or meditative absorption. It is the eighth fold of the Noble Eightfold Path, right concentration.

The Four Material Jhānas

As described in the chapter on the Four Noble Truths, each jhāna has jhāna factors:

“Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion.

“Again, with the stilling of applied and sustained thought, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration.

“Again, with the fading away as well of rapture, a bhikkhu abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna, on account of which the noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’

“Again, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.” - [MN 25.12-15]

In summary:

1. First jhāna: applied and sustained thought, rapture, and pleasure
2. Second jhāna: self-confidence, singleness of mind, rapture and pleasure
3. Third jhāna: equanimity and pleasure
4. Fourth jhāna: equanimity

“Applied thought” means directing the thinking process to the object of meditation. It is also called “directed thought.” You direct whatever thinking there is to the subject of concentration.

In this case, directed thought means that you keep directing your thoughts to the breath. You don't direct them anywhere else. This is the factor that helps you stay concentrated on one thing.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*]

In the first translation, the second factor is “sustained thought.” However, it is now more commonly rendered as “evaluation.” Directed thought directs your mind to concentration. Then you evaluate what you see and make adjustments as necessary to sustain your concentration.

Evaluation is the discernment factor, and it covers several activities. You evaluate how comfortable the breath is, and how well you're staying with the breath. You think up ways of improving either your breath or the way you're focused on the breath; then you try them out, evaluating the results of your experiments. If they don't turn out well, you try to think up new approaches. If they do turn out well, you try to figure out how to get the most out of them. This last aspect of evaluation includes the act of spreading good breath energy into different parts of the body, spreading your awareness to fill the body as well, and then maintaining that sense of full-body breath and full-body awareness.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each & Every Breath*]

These first two factors are ones that you cultivate and develop. The other two are the fruits of that cultivation. They will arise when the mind is concentrated.

The words “rapture” and “pleasure” are our old Pāli friends “pīti” and “sukkha.” There is a classic simile in the *Visuddhimagga* that explains the difference between them:

If a man exhausted in the desert saw or heard about a pond on the edge of a wood, he would have [piti]; if he went into the wood’s shade and used the water, he would have [sukkha].

- [*Visuddhimagga*, IV.100]

Pīti is a whole body experience. People who do yoga find it easier to cultivate pīti than people who do not. It seems to flow naturally from their body awareness practices. Having said that, I can do it, and I don’t do yoga. It was just harder for me.

(Many people ask about the relationship between yoga and Buddhist meditation. I can only pass along some anecdotal comments. I was at a retreat once where someone asked why the Buddha never talked about yoga. One of the retreatants said that yoga, as we know it, did not come about until about the mid-first millennium CE, about 1,000 years after the Buddha’s death. Yoga is a Hindu practice, and it has theistic qualities that are missing in Buddhism. However, there are monks and nuns who do yoga, and if you can excise out the theistic overtones, yoga can be a useful adjunct to Buddhist meditation.)

As already discussed, pīti can be a highly charged state. It can be so highly charged that it can be uncomfortable. At other times it will be milder. I call this the jhāna buzz. It feels more like bliss than joy or rapture.

The dominant quality of the first jhāna is pīti. Sukkha arises along with it, but that may be hard to see. The word “sukkha” means “pleasure.” It is the opposite of “dukkha.” It also means “happiness.” I think that both are good renderings of the experience.

As the passage says, “with the stilling of applied and sustained thought, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the second jhāna.” Thus, the thinking fades away. You lock into the state of concentration and no longer need the directed thought and evaluation.

The new factors of the second jhāna are 1) self-confidence, which is also translated as “composure,” and 2) “singleness of mind,” which is also translated as “unification of awareness” or “unification of mind.”

Ṭhānissaro gives a slightly different rendering of second jhāna factors:

The second jhāna has three factors: singleness of preoccupation, rapture, and pleasure. As the breath and awareness become one, they begin to feel saturated. No matter how much you try to make them feel even more full, they can't fill any further. At this point, directed thought and evaluation have no further work to do. You can let them go.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each & Every Breath*]

The sukka is more dominant in the second jhāna than the pīti. The second jhāna is calmer and more tranquil than the first jhāna. You may find yourself thinking that you are simply happy.

In the third jhāna the pīti fades away leaving only the “happiness” or “pleasure.” It is a feeling of deep contentment. And we now have one new factor, and that is “equanimity.” The third jhāna is very calm, very tranquil, and very pleasant.

Finally, in the fourth jhāna the pleasure disappears, leaving only the equanimity.

Attaining the four jhānas is the “standard way” to attain awakening. However, the Buddha also said that just the first jhāna is enough:

“When it was said: ‘Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of the taints occurs in dependence on the first jhāna,’ for what reason was this said? Here, secluded from sensual pleasures... a bhikkhu enters and dwells in the first jhāna... He considers whatever phenomena exist there pertaining to form, feeling, perception, volitional activities, and consciousness as impermanent, suffering, an illness, a boil, a dart, misery, affliction, alien, disintegrating, empty, and non-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena and directs it to the deathless element thus: ‘This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna.’ If he is firm in this, he attains the destruction of the taints.” - [AN 9.36]

However, I caution you against looking for shortcuts. I think the Buddha here is simply stating a fact. It would be unusual for someone to attain an awakening with only the first jhāna. Nonetheless, the possibility exists.

What Are the Immaterial States?

“...with the complete surmounting of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of sensory impact, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that ‘space is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of infinite space. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of infinite space, aware that ‘consciousness is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of infinite consciousness. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of infinite consciousness, aware that ‘there is nothing,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of nothingness. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of nothingness, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra, to have become invisible to the Evil One by depriving Māra’s eye of its opportunity.

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the cessation of perception and feeling.” - [MN 25.16-20]

Here we have the five-fold description of the immaterial states. As noted, sometimes the fifth one (cessation) is left out. The most common formulation for the immaterial states only lists the first four. They are:

1. The infinity of space
2. The infinity of consciousness
3. The base of nothingness
4. The base of neither perception-nor-non-perception

These states are closely related. This is especially true for the first three. The differences between them are subtle. In order to move between the first three immaterial states, you just make a slight change in the focus of attention. Going from the base of nothingness to the base of neither perception-nor-non-perception is more difficult.

I am not going to say more about the immaterial states at this point. They are covered in the next chapter. How important they are in any one person’s practice varies. Traditionally, as noted, the standard formula is

to master the first four jhānas as the entry point to awakening. We have also seen that just the first jhāna may be sufficient for awakening. Historically some arahants practiced the immaterial states after attaining an awakening. Other arahants never practiced them. And for others, the immaterial attainments are quite useful in attaining an awakening. I have a friend who does these regularly, and she is quite comfortable with them.

One of the values of the immaterial states is that because they are immaterial, you lose the sense of a physical body. As a result, they help you detach from self-identifying with the body. There is also a loss of egocentricity, of the self being at the center of things. As Larry Rosenberg likes to say, most of the time our lives are like a movie. The movie is about me, it stars me, it's directed by me, produced by me... and that is a problem. The immaterial states help free you from that kind of thinking.

Myths About Jhāna

There are many myths about jhāna. I am not going to try to refute them all here. This is a user's guide and not an academic treatise. But you will inevitably run into these issues so I want to address some of the common ones.

Is Jhāna Required to Attain Awakening?

For those that say that the jhānas are not necessary to Buddhist practice; they are doing the Noble Sevenfold Path, instead of the Noble Eightfold Middle Path. Right Concentration (jhāna) is an integral part of the Buddhist path.

- [Bhante Henepola Gunaratana]

Is jhāna really necessary? (hint: yes)

- [Justin Merritt]

It is clear from the Buddha's teachings that jhāna is required to attain an awakening. There is one passage in the Pāli Canon that is sometimes interpreted quite liberally as saying that jhāna is not required to attain an awakening, but the evidence is overwhelming that jhāna is a fundamental part of the path.

In the twentieth century the political situation in Burma influenced how Buddhism evolved there. In turn, that influenced how Buddhism was imported into the West. There was a Burmese monk named Ledi Sayadaw who was afraid that British rule threatened Buddhism. So he developed "vipassana" or "insight meditation." He thought that this type of meditation, which does not require intense monastic training, would keep the tradition alive. Insight meditation emphasizes "dry insight," which is awakening without jhāna.

This was a noble intention. However, dry insight is not supported by the Buddha's teachings.

If you would like to know more about this piece of Buddhist history, see the article "[The Insight Revolution](#)" in the November 2013 edition of *Buddhadharma Magazine*.

Jhāna in the Pāli Canon and the Visuddhimagga

As we saw in the discussion on concentration in the Four Noble Truths, jhāna was the standard practice among the Buddha's monks and nuns:

When they depict the Buddha telling his disciples to go meditate, they never quote him as saying 'go do vipassana,' but always 'go do jhāna.'

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "[One Tool Among Many](#)"]

However, the description in the *Visuddhimagga* says that attaining jhāna is

almost impossibly difficult:

The arousing of the sign is difficult for one who has done the preliminary work and only one in a hundred or a thousand can do it. To extend the sign when it has arisen and to reach absorption is difficult and only one in a hundred or a thousand can do it. To tame one's mind in the fourteen ways after reaching absorption is difficult and only one in a hundred or a thousand can do it. Rapid response after attaining transformation is difficult and only one in a hundred or a thousand can do it.

- [Visuddhimagga, XII.8]

If you do the math given here, only 1 in $100 \times 100 \times 100 = 1,000,000$ can reach absorption. Thus it is highly unlikely that the Buddha's monks and nuns were doing the type of jhāna practice described in the *Visuddhimagga*.

One difference between Visuddhimagga style jhāna and that described in the Pāli Canon is the use of a "nimitta." The Pāli word "nimitta" literally means "sign." The Buddha used the word "nimitta" in different contexts. Typically he meant something like a signpost or a milestone, an indication that you have arrived somewhere. For example, the arising of pīti is a sign that you have achieved a certain level of concentration.

However, in the *Visuddhimagga* a nimitta means something akin to a "mind-made object." This is most commonly a bright, white light in the mind:

You should determine to keep your mind calmly concentrated on the white uggaha-nimitta for one, two, three hours, or more. If you can keep your mind fixed on the uggaha-nimitta for one or two hours, it should become clear, bright, and brilliant. This is then the pa

ibhaga-nimitta (counterpart sign). Determine and practice to keep your mind on the pa ibhaga-nimitta for one, two, or three hours. Practice until you succeed.

At this stage you will reach either access (upacara) or absorption (appana) concentration. It is called access concentration because it is close to and precedes jhāna. Absorption concentration is jhāna.

- [Pa Auk Tawya Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing*]

Remaining concentrated on a mind-made white light for three hours is quite a tall order (!). And as seen from the numbers given in the *Visuddhimagga*, it is unlikely that most people will ever be able to do this.

To be sure, it is quite common to see a diffuse white light doing concentration practice. The Buddha may have used the word “nimitta” in this way, i.e, to indicate that you have attained a certain level of concentration. But there are other possible signs as well. There may be visions, etc. They are to be ignored.

The *Visuddhimagga* style nimitta is a sharply defined circle, like looking at the moon. This requires a very high degree of focused concentration.

There is a good description of the history of the nimitta in jhāna by Bhikkhu Soṇa in an article called [“The Mystery of the Breath Nimitta.”](#)

Another difference in the *Visuddhimagga* concentration is that you focus on a narrow area, typically the nose, and exclude anything else. This goes against the instructions of the Buddha. As we have seen, the Buddha told us to expand our area of concentration to include the whole body. It is a type of concentration that is broadly based.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu says that this narrow type of concentration is, in fact, very dangerous. It can cause you to lose the distinction between “inside” and “outside.” One practitioner of *Visuddhimagga* jhāna thought he had

said something to someone when it was just part of his inner dialog. Another one became so narrowly focused that he could not do his simple work job - chopping vegetables - on a retreat. So not only is this type of concentration not what the Buddha taught, it can cause serious problems.

This type of concentration also contradicts the Buddha's teaching that concentration and wisdom/discernment arise together. This cannot happen with laser-like focus. There is no room for anything but the concentration. There is no way for insights to arise.

Don't worry about falling into this type of concentration accidentally. You have to try extremely hard, usually months and months and maybe years on retreat, to attain Visuddhimagga jhāna. The style of practice that we are doing, one that emphasizes a broad-based awareness, does not lead to these problems. The type of concentration that we are practicing is closer to how Larry Rosenberg describes it, "steadying the mind."

It is not easy to attain jhāna, but it is possible. It is very pleasant, it is an antidote to the dangers of sense pleasures, and it is a very important step on the path to awakening.

One reason that a proper definition of jhāna is important is that there are many teachers who criticize the practice. I think that they are referring to the Visuddhimagga style of jhāna. They may have seen some of the problems that I mentioned. But it is difficult to see how there is anything wrong with the canonical type of jhāna, at least if you claim to teach in accord with the Buddha's instructions.

Mistaking Jhāna for Awakening

Finally, there is the problem of mistaking jhāna for awakening.

If you have not been instructed in the practice of jhāna, I believe that this is possible. My first practice was Zen, and in Zen there is this experience of "kensho," or "satori." It indicates a breakthrough in your practice. It is supposed to mean that you have awakened. But when I learned about

jhāna, it sounded like what I had been told about kensho.

In non-Buddhist traditions, the immaterial jhānas are interpreted as oneness with God.

As already described, Buddhism has had its share of scandals, especially sexual improprieties. This has happened with teachers who claim to have attained an awakening.

By definition, however, this is not possible. Someone who has attained an awakening is incapable of violating the precepts.

Jhāna is a conditioned state. When you come out of jhāna, you are back in the world of the mundane. Jhāna has wonderful benefits. But it is not an awakening, and you are still subject to the three poisons, the hindrances, etc. This is why it is very important to understand jhāna, so you know what it is, how to work with it, and how to not be misled by the experience.

I am not saying that everyone who claims to have experienced kensho is experiencing jhāna. I would have no way of knowing that. But if this is the claim and that person goes on to break the precepts, they have not attained an awakening.

When you attain an awakening, there is a fundamental change in the mind. Once this happens, you do not have any desire to turn back. Why would you? The world of sense desires looks like a minefield, full of dangers. There is no appeal in it.

Attaining Jhāna

“Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion.” - [MN 25.13]

The first time that I attained jhāna, I didn't know what it was. I think this is very common, especially on retreat. Unfortunately, since I did not know what it was, I did not know what to do with it. It was overwhelming and exhausting. It was equally unfortunate that the teachers could only tell me "not to get stuck there." But I was stuck there, and I wanted to get out and did not know how.

Hopefully, by having a full description of this state this will not happen to you.

I have practiced jhāna in two ways. I am going to describe them both. Method A is how I first attained jhāna. It is a more structured way of attaining jhāna. Having said that, I hardly ever practice this way anymore. I now use Method B.

Method A

First of all, you need to be comfortable. If you have knee pain, it is not possible to attain jhāna. You need a good, stable, comfortable posture.

Now you bring yourself into the present moment. Go through the process discussed at the beginning of the guide:

1. Generate gratitude.
2. Remember that you practice for the welfare and benefit of yourself and all beings.
3. Generate mettā for yourself.
4. Reflect on the five subjects for frequent recollection:
 1. That you are subject to aging.
 2. That you are subject to sickness.
 3. That you are subject to death, and that this can happen at any time.
 4. That eventually you will be separated from everything and everyone that you know.
 5. That all you will take with you is the consequences of your actions.

5. Turn your attention to the breath. Follow the breath all the way in and all the way out.

If the mind wanders off of the breath bring it back. If you are having a difficult time staying on the breath, use one of the techniques that we have already discussed:

1. Note each in-breath with the word "in" and each out-breath with the word "out."
2. If that does not work try counting the breaths.
3. If that does not work, do body sweeping calming and relaxing each part of the body as you encounter it.

The beautiful breath is also a wonderful way to get quiet. Consciously breathe in until the whole body fills with breath energy. Then simply let the air out. It's like going down a sliding board. As the air goes out, let the mind fall into silence. When you breathe in again, breathe in the silence.

Eventually, the mind will get quieter. You will be able to stay with the breath. I cannot tell you how long that will take.

Ayya Khema had a student who did not attain jhāna for 19 years. This is unusual, but it can happen. However, it is to her credit that she did not make it into a problem. The rest of her practice developed wonderfully, so by the time she did attain jhāna, she just slid into it like a comfortable set of clothes. This is the way to practice.

The breath will finally be in the forefront of your awareness. Anything else that happens will be happening in the background, like the scenery on a stage. Your thoughts will be quiet and wispy.

As you get more concentrated, you will begin to feel pleasant sensations in the body. This is the pīti. It may be mild, and it may also be elusive. It may move around. Keep your attention on the breath until you feel the pīti consistently somewhere in the body.

Leigh Brasington says that the pleasant sensations may appear anywhere. The most common places are in the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. Wherever it is, once you have a steady spot where there is a pleasant sensation, put your attention on the “pleasantness” of the pleasant sensation.

This is the tricky part. You are concentrating on the pleasantness, not the body part.

Once you do this, let go of anything else, especially the desire to attain jhāna. Your concentration must be wholly on the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation. If you push yourself now to “attain jhāna,” you won’t. The next step is to do nothing. Just keep your attention on the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation and do nothing.

If your concentration wavers, go back to the breath. If it wavers even more, go back to one of the breath following techniques.

If you stay with the pleasantness it will spread. You cannot make this happen. It happens as a result of your concentrating on the pleasantness. Eventually, it will spread to the whole body. And at some point you will cross over. You are there.

The first time that you enter jhāna, it may be extremely fleeting. It may last for just a moment or two. It is very common to get excited at this point and that will take you out of jhāna. Just go back to the breath and repeat as necessary.

Leigh Brasington describes it in this way:

Pleasant sensations can occur pretty much anywhere. The most common place people that find pleasant sensations when they get to access concentration is in the hands. What you want to do with your hands when you meditate is put them in a nice position in which you can just leave them. The traditional posture is one hand

holding the other, with the thumbs lightly touching. This is a quite excellent posture because it has the tendency of moving the shoulders back and lining up your spine nicely. When the hands are held like this, many people find that eventually there is a nice, tingly, pleasant sensation that appears in the hands. You can also put your hands in all sorts of other positions - just place them however appeals to you. When you get to access concentration, if you notice that there's a nice pleasant feeling in the hands, drop the attention on the breath and focus entirely on the pleasantness of that sensation.

Another common place that people find a pleasant sensation is in the heart center, particularly if you're using mettā as the access method. Just shift your attention to the pleasantness of that sensation. Other places people find pleasant sensations include the third eye, the top of the head, the shoulders - actually, you name a body part, and I've had some student find a pleasant sensation there that they were able to focus upon long enough for the first jhāna to arise. It does not matter where the pleasant sensation manifests; what matters is that there is a pleasant sensation and you're able to put your attention on it and - now here comes the really hard part - do nothing else.

You find the pleasant sensation, and shift your attention to the pleasant sensation. You observe the pleasantness of the pleasant sensation, and do nothing else. If you can do that, the pleasant sensation will begin to grow in intensity, it will become stronger. This will not happen in a linear way. It'll sort of grow a little bit, and then grow a little bit more and then hang out, and grow a little bit

more...and then eventually, it will suddenly take off and take you into what is obviously an altered state of consciousness.

In this altered state of consciousness, you will be overcome with Rapture ... Euphoria ... Ecstasy ... Delight. These are all English words that are used to translate the Pāli word piti. Piti is this physical sensation that literally takes you over and takes you into an altered state. It will be accompanied by an emotional sensation of joy and happiness. The Pāli word is sukha, the opposite of dukkha [pain, suffering]. And, if you remain one-pointed on this experience of piti and sukha, that is the first jhāna.

- [Leigh Brasington, "[Instruction for Entering Jhana](#)"]

Method B

At this point, you have a pretty good idea of the jhāna terrain. You know about the four (material) jhānas, what the jhāna factors are, and you know a structured method for entering the first jhāna.

The problem with this is that it can make the practice sound like a cookbook, and it's not. I know more than one prominent teacher who says that you can only enter the jhānas in sequence. In other words, if you want to do the third jhāna, you have to go in sequence: one, two, three. I know that is not the case. I did jhānas two and three before I could do one. I had a lot of trouble getting into the first jhāna. The first jhāna, as noted, is an experience very much in the body, and at the time I was too much in my own head. I was not connected enough to my body to enter the first jhāna easily.

The Pāli Canon says that the Buddha first learned to enter the immaterial attainments "the base of nothingness" and the "base of neither perception

nor non-perception,” and as a child he had entered the first jhāna. Thus, according to his own account the Buddha attained the first jhāna and the seventh and eighth jhānas before attaining any of the others. The scholars who say that the jhānas must be done in sequence claim that the canonical account is wrong. But the fact is that this is how the story goes, and it also models my own experience..

Even today in Burma, where admittedly they do Visuddhimagga style jhāna, part of the mastery of doing jhāna is to jump from any one jhāna to any other. It is part of the final jhāna exam.

So that is one area where the cookbook doesn't quite hold together.

Not every state of concentration fits neatly into the formula that the Buddha gave. Even the *Visuddhimagga* lists five material jhānas, not four. And if we look outside of Buddhism, other religious traditions give different formulas. These states and practices are not unique to Buddhism. In the book *Jewish Meditation*, Aryeh Kaplan describes what to a Buddhist would be one material state and one immaterial state. These practices are also known in Christian mysticism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and I am sure many others. And they do not all follow the same formula.

The problem is that it can all become quite mechanical. You see everything in terms of the cookbook, and as a result you are not developing your own discernment. If you are in a state that does not fit the formula, you force it into that mold.

So it is very useful to do a formless concentration practice and see where that takes you. You already know the lay of the land. You know about pīti and sukka. You know about going from the higher energy of pīti to the lower energy of sukka, from a state of joy and rapture to happiness and then contentment. Then equanimity will arise, and finally you let go of the pleasantness, and all that is left is the equanimity. And soon we will be looking more deeply into the immaterial states. This gives you a map of the territory.

Method B, which is an unstructured way of practice, is to simply get as

concentrated as you can and see where that takes you. You should know the drill by now. Start by focusing at the nose. As your concentration gets stronger, your attention will naturally expand to include the whole body. Get the mind as quiet as possible. No matter what, stay with the breath. If and when jhāna factors arise, simply note them with your background awareness. But always stay with the breath.

Chances are that you will find yourself going in and out of jhāna. It could be any of them. Use your discernment to figure out where you are, and that may not fit into the canonical definitions. Learn to play with them. Change your place of focus. Change your breathing. See what it has to offer.

Thānissaro tells this story:

...[Ajaan Fuang] tried to instill in his students these qualities of self-reliance, ingenuity, and a willingness to take risks and test things for themselves. He did that not only by talking about these qualities, but also by forcing you into situations where you'd have to develop them. Had he always been there to confirm for you that, "Yes, you've reached the third jhāna," or, "No, that's only the second jhāna," he would have short-circuited the qualities he was trying to instill. He, rather than your own powers of observation, would have been the authority on what was going on in your mind; and you would have been absolved of any responsibility for correctly evaluating what you had experienced...

As he once told me, "If I have to explain everything, you'll get used to having things handed to you on a platter. And then what will you do when problems come up in your meditation and you don't have any experience in figuring things out on your own?"

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "[Jhana Not by the Numbers](#)"]

As you get better at this practice, the sense of well-being gets stronger. Sitting is more pleasant. Your mind is sharper. Insights arise.

Now is also a good time to talk about the quality of attention. As I have said, the concentration that we are developing is broadly based. This is not an electron microscope. It is more like the zoom lens on a camera.

You have a focused kind of attention. That is what you are using to stay with the breath. You also have a background attention. That is what helps you see what is going on. It is especially important in the factor of evaluation.

This background awareness is especially helpful off of the cushion. We use it to observe the mind during the day. It helps to keep those Nazis in our mind from having complete control. We use the mind to watch the mind.

The Hindrances

An interesting exercise when you go into the first jhāna is to look for the hindrances. They won't be there. You can look for desire, ill will, restlessness, sloth, and doubt, and you won't see them.

There are times in your practice when one or more of the hindrances arise. If they are strong, you may need to work with them in a pro-active way to abandon them. Sometimes simply turning your attention to them is enough to make them disappear. Simple awareness is enough. At other times, you must apply an antidote, like the Buddha's suggestion of splashing water on the face if you feel sleepy.

But as you get more concentrated, they simply fall away, and that is another way to handle them. The concentration itself makes them disappear. This shows that your skill as a meditator is increasing. And this is a taste of one of the fruits of complete awakening.

Getting Out of Jhāna

Usually the problem with jhāna is getting into it and then staying there. However, there are cases where the jhāna takes on a life of its own and you cannot get out of it. If this happens to you, take a very deep breath and then exhale as far out as you can. You may need to blow the air out through your mouth, and you may need to do this several times. Bring the energy level down as much as possible.

Getting uncomfortably stuck is usually only a problem in the first jhāna. I am not aware of any case where it has happened in other jhānas. However if this does happen, the same technique should work.

Continuing to Practice Jhāna

In the next sections we will look at how to get into the other jhānas, but before we do that I want to caution against turning this into a collection of attainments. Once you enter jhāna, that is a very important step. And as we have seen, according to the Buddha, attaining even the first jhāna can be enough for an awakening.

So do not be in too much of a hurry to go on to other jhānas. You must do a lot of work with jhāna. Just trying to learn how to go through them would be like flying from Paris to Berlin to Rome, and then saying that you had seen France, Germany, and Italy. There is a lot of territory in each jhāna. I know people who are extremely adept at moving between them but who never go on to attain an awakening. There are, to be sure, a number of reasons that I think this happens, but one of them is that they are too impatient to spend the time that it takes to fully explore France, as it were.

There is no extra credit for being able to move up and down through the jhānas. You are better off doing one jhāna really well than you are learning how to move up and down through them all. There are no fixed rules in this game, but patience - remember patience? - is one of our most important allies. It's twin sibling, persistence, is the other. They are the

Romulus and Remus of meditation.

We live in this world of attainment and accomplishment, and that is very disruptive to a meditation practice. I have spent a lot of my life cultivating patience and persistence because a) they are not a natural part of my temperament and b) they are really important in engineering, my chosen career. And after a fashion, I began to think of myself as a pretty patient person.

Then I went to India and I got a completely different idea of what patience and persistence mean. We visited a place called "[Mehta's Silk](#)" where they do silk weaving the same way they did it 2,000 years ago. I got to see an eighty-year-old master silk weaver at work.

Mehta's Silk has more modern weaving machines, but this being India, the master weavers refuse to use them. They sit on a very uncomfortable concrete floor. The loom is in a pit that is below the floor level. The weaver sits there with only a picture of the finished product. He stares at it for a while, and eventually he picks up one of the silk bobbins and runs the thread through the tapestry. Then he carefully tamps down the thread to get the proper tension. He stares at it for a while until he is satisfied that it is perfect, and then he goes back to the picture and stares some more. Wash, rinse, repeat. This is what they do all day, every day.

I bought a couple of those silk weavings. Each one of them is about eighteen inches wide and three feet long. It took three months to make each one.

That is patience, and I found it deeply humbling. It gave me a completely different perspective on what that word means. So if you spend countless hours/months/years doing first jhāna, and that feels like the right place for you, and your practice is progressing in a balanced way, then that is a good way to practice.

There are a lot of moving parts to the Buddha's Path. Jhāna is one of them. It is a very important one, to be sure, but it is just one. And the first jhāna is also just one. You may have an affinity for one of the jhānas. And

as happened with me and first jhāna, you may find one that proves challenging. It is all a part of the practice.

So practice like the weaver. Get each thread just so. Whatever thread you are using at the moment make that the only one you care about. Eventually you will have the whole tapestry, and it happens one patiently and perfectly placed thread at a time.



Figure: Master weaver at Mehta's Silk, Varanasi, India

Entering the Second Jhāna

“Again, with the stilling of applied and sustained thought, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration.” - [MN 25.14]

“Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within,

having no inflow from east, west, north, or south, and with the skies periodically supplying abundant showers, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate and pervade, suffuse and fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; even so, the [bhikkhu] permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and pleasure born of composure. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture and pleasure born of composure..." - [AN 5.28]

As with so many passages in the Canon, there is a wonderful poetry to the second quote here, the one from the Aṅguttara Nikāya. Ponds like this do exist. They call them "kettle ponds" or "kettle lakes" in New England. Curiously, the most famous pond in New England is a kettle pond. That is Walden Pond, once home to the great American mystic, Henry David Thoreau. You can circumambulate Walden Pond without ever crossing a stream. Walden Pond is, as the Buddha described, fed completely by underground streams.

In the first jhāna, there is conscious activity due to the directed thought and evaluation. In the second jhāna, there is still the effort of keeping the mind concentrated, but now the mind is locked in. The directed thought and evaluation fall away. Further, the highly charged energy of the first jhāna, the pīti, becomes less pronounced than the sukka, the pleasantness/pleasure/happiness. You simply feel happy.

You may also find that the energy of the first jhāna is rooted in the whole body. In the second jhāna the distinction between body and mind falls away. There is no body experiencing joy/rapture/bliss. There is simply the happiness. The background and foreground attention are one. This is the unification of mind.

I know of three ways to get from first jhāna to second jhāna.

The first is to simply let it happen. You get into first jhāna, and you

continue to stay with the breath as long as you can and as steadily as you can. Eventually the need for conscious activity to stay in jhāna falls away. I think that the texts imply that this is how the Buddha wants us to practice.

This may take quite a while to happen. This way of getting into second jhāna is consistent with Method B.

If you are achievement oriented, this will be a good way for you to practice. And it may be even if you are not. It helps to take some of the “me” out of the practice. It becomes more about the doing and less about the doer. You are not just practicing jhāna, you are practicing patience, contentment, and other qualities that are important on the path.

However, if the energy of the first jhāna is a problem, you may want a more pro-active way of getting into second jhāna. The second way that you can get into second jhāna is to find a place in the body where there is stillness. Put your attention there. Use this as your focal point for following the breath in and out. Use at least some of your attention to focus on the stillness. This should take the energy level down to a calmer, more tranquil place.

The breathing and the attention in the second jhāna stay together naturally. Yes, there is some energy and some effort involved in keeping them there, but they all work together. Nothing is forced. They are all in perfect harmony. Larry Rosenberg says that he had a student once who described it as a feeling of “being breathed”:

It's as if, in the first jhāna, you were identifying with one part of your breath and one part of your awareness as you worked another part of the breath through another part of your awareness. Now those dividing lines are erased. Awareness becomes one, the breath becomes one, and both become one with each other.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each & Every Breath*]

A third way of entering the second jhāna is to put your attention on the heart center. It is like pushing a button in an elevator. That button is in the center of the chest. Whatever spot in the body you have been using as your primary place in which to follow the breath (usually the nose), drop that spot and use the heart center instead.

You may recall that the heart center - the heart *chakra* - is where you put your attention for mettā practice. There is a strong connection between the second jhāna and mettā. When you get a strong second jhāna, turn your attention to mettā. See if you can feel any anger, aversion, or hatred for your worst enemy. You will not be able to.

Once you can enter the second jhāna, one of the skills of doing jhāna is to move back and forth between them. You can even move in and out of jhāna. You should try this. Go back to where you were before entering jhāna. Now enter the first jhāna. Then enter the second jhāna. Now move back to the first jhāna. Then back to the second jhāna. In second jhāna you can also move back and forth between it and mettā. Then you can move back to the first jhāna and back to being out of jhāna. And so forth. This is fun, and it shows that your skill is growing. You are gaining mastery over your own mind. The tail is no longer wagging the dog.

Once you are in the second jhāna, take plenty of time to explore the territory. Getting into the second jhāna just means you have landed in Berlin. Now explore the whole of it, all of Germany.

You can do these practices for months and years, and you will continue to find different qualities to them. There is always a new aspect to explore. This is important to maintain interest in the practice. Otherwise, it becomes dry. If you have not yet attained jhāna it might be hard to understand how you can get bored with bliss and happiness, but it does happen.

Wrong Concentration

This leads to the topic of “delusion concentration.” You can get into a

state that feels like jhāna. It is quite pleasant but it is like the mind is in a fog. In true jhāna the mind is sharp and alert. Your awareness and attention are clear:

Delusion concentration... comes about when the breath gets so comfortable that your focus drifts from the breath to the sense of comfort itself, your mindfulness begins to blur, and your sense of the body and your surroundings gets lost in a pleasant haze. When you emerge, you find it hard to identify where exactly you were focused.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each & Every Breath*]

Thānissaro also describes another type of wrong concentration that is, I believe, the same as Visuddhimagga jhāna:

The state of non-perception comes about from making your focus extremely one-pointed and so refined that it refuses to settle on or label even the most fleeting mental objects. You drop into a state in which you lose all sense of the body, of any internal or external sounds, or of any thoughts or perceptions at all. There's just enough tiny awareness to let you know, when you emerge, that you haven't been asleep. You can stay there for many hours, and yet time passes very quickly. Two hours can seem like two minutes. You can also program yourself to come out at a particular time.

This state does have its uses - as when you're in severe pain and want some respite from it. As long as you recognize that it's not right concentration or release, the only danger is that you may decide that you like hiding out there so much that you don't want to do the work needed to go further in the practice.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each & Every Breath*]

The important quality here is perception. Without perception you cannot have insight, and you cannot develop the vipassana, wisdom, and insight in tandem with concentration. The quality of perception is present in every level of jhāna except for the immaterial states of neither perception nor non-perception and cessation. Otherwise, it is wrong concentration. In those last two states, you must come out of them in order to evaluate what happened while you were in them.

Entering the Third Jhāna

“Again, with the fading away as well of rapture, a bhikkhu abides in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, he enters upon and abides in the third jhāna, on account of which the noble ones announce: ‘He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful.’” - [MN 25.14]

“Again, with the fading away as well of rapture, a bhikkhu dwells equanimous and, mindful and clearly comprehending, he experiences pleasure with the body; he enters and dwells in the third jhāna of which the noble ones declare: ‘He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily.’ He makes the happiness divested of rapture drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body that is not pervaded by the happiness divested of rapture. Just as, in a pond of blue or red or white lotuses, some lotuses that are born and grow in the water might thrive immersed in the water without rising out of it, and cool water would drench, steep, fill, and pervade them to their tips and their roots, so that there would be no part of those lotuses that would

not be pervaded by cool water; so too, the bhikkhu makes the happiness divested of rapture drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body that is not pervaded by the happiness divested of rapture. This is the third development of noble five-factored right concentration.” - [AN 5.28]

In this passage, the reason that the concentration is “five-factored” is because it is the four jhānas plus insight. This once again emphasizes the development of concentration and insight “yoked together.”

So there are two jhāna factors here: pleasure (sukkha) and equanimity (upekkhā). There is deep contentment. You may find yourself thinking, “I feel contented.” It is pleasant and calm.

Here the energy level is even calmer. As with the second jhāna, this will happen naturally if you practice the second jhāna long enough. It is natural for the mind in second jhāna to become calmer and more still, and this will lead you to the third jhāna.

Something that you can play with is the qualities of mind that come with these deeper states of concentration. Find the stillness and lock onto it. Do the same with serenity.

We start by working very hard to get the mind still. We deal with distractions: the three poisons, the hindrances, etc. Our attention is mainly on the difficult mind states that we are trying to abandon.

But now we can turn that process around and latch onto the positive mind states. The difficult ones are now weaker. We direct our attention to the stillness, the calm, and the serenity. We can just go there, and any difficult mind states just hover in the background. They are not a problem anymore.

There is also a pro-active way to go into the third jhāna. In the second jhāna, the attention is at the heart center. Now move it down to the

abdomen, to just below the navel. In Zen they call this the “hara.” With these energy spots in the body, you may have to look around a little to find the sweet spot. Feel for it. You should feel the energy. These are not physical locations in the body. They are energy centers.

Moving the attention down also moves the energy level down. There are many ways to work with the breath in the abdomen. You can feel the diaphragm moving up and down. You can feel the rising and falling of the abdomen. You can imagine a balloon filling and emptying as the air moves in and out of the lungs. Play with these and see what works best for you. Make up your own. The cushion is your laboratory. Don't be afraid to try things, to experiment, and don't be afraid to fail. No one has ever been harmed cultivating serenity:

Success represents the 1% of your work which results from the 99% that is called failure.

- [Soichiro Honda]

When you are in the third jhāna, make sure that you can identify the jhāna factors: pleasantness and equanimity. The pleasantness has been with you all along, although in the first jhāna the pīti overwhelms it. The equanimity is new. If worldly unpleasant sensations arise, they will simply pass you by like a car on the highway. This is also true for pleasant sensations. It is incredibly liberating. You can now “sit in the midst of your own experience.”

It takes a while to get these states to mature. And of course, the object is not to sit down on the cushion and start pressing buttons and moving up and down through the jhānas, although this is certainly a useful practice. (It is also fun.) The objective is to develop all the qualities that the Buddha teaches. It always goes back to virtue. If you are not cultivating kindness, generosity, wisdom, patience, etc., etc., etc., there is no point to any of this.

The more you do these practices, the more the qualities of virtue should

manifest in your life. If you use your meditative attainments to feel superior to other people, you are missing the point. You will have conceit up to the point of final awakening, just make sure that you use it skillfully. Use it to believe in your ability to awaken. Eventually it will go away, but in the meantime you need conceit and self-confidence to help you on the path. Other people have done this, and so can you.

I recently heard a story about a self-described arahant who is “testy and unpleasant.” I don’t believe that he is an arahant. I know a few people who have attained at least the first stage of awakening. People gravitate toward them. They inspire. They are calm and centered. They are pleasant to be around. They have a sense of humor. They embody altruistic virtue.

In Buddhism, just as in every other aspect of life, people like to make claims about themselves. But as the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. As you get more skilled on the cushion, make sure that this skill is manifesting equally off the cushion.

“Every day, think as you wake up, today I am fortunate to be alive, I have a precious human life, I am not going to waste it. I am going to use all my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others; to achieve awakening for the benefit of all beings. I am going to have kind thoughts towards others, I am not going to get angry or think badly about others. I am going to benefit others as much as I can.”

- [Dalai Lama XIV]

Entering the Fourth Jhāna

“Again, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the fourth jhāna,

which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.” - [MN 25.12-15]

“Again, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and dejection, a bhikkhu enters and dwells in the fourth jhāna, neither painful nor pleasant, which has purification of mindfulness by equanimity. He sits pervading this body with a pure bright mind, so that there is no part of his whole body that is not pervaded by the pure bright mind. Just as a man might be sitting covered from the head down with a white cloth, so that there would be no part of his whole body that is not pervaded by the white cloth; so too, the bhikkhu sits pervading this body with a pure bright mind, so that there is no part of his whole body that is not pervaded by the pure bright mind. This is the fourth development of noble five-factored right concentration.” - [AN 5.28]

The fourth jhāna has only one factor: equanimity.

Equanimity shows up in many of the Buddha’s teachings. It is one of the brahma vihāras, the noble abidings. It is one of the factors of awakening.

As with most of the qualities that we are cultivating, equanimity can manifest in three ways:

1. In a mundane or worldly sense. In this case, we simply try to do the best we can with whatever skill level we have.
2. As a fruit of jhāna. This is still conditioned, but it gives us a pure sense of what it is like after awakening.
3. As a fruit of awakening. In this case, the quality is no longer conditioned. It is simply a part of our being. We are not capable of acting in a way that is contrary to it.

Until you have attained either the third or fourth jhāna, I do not believe it is possible to know true equanimity. Until then, you will be practicing equanimity in the worldly or mundane sense.

In order to go from the third jhāna to the fourth jhāna, let go of the pleasantness. All that will be left is the equanimity.

The mind will be very still and very sharp and alert. The breath will be subtle. You may feel like the breathing has stopped. Sometimes people panic when this happens.

There is some debate about this phenomenon. There are claims that when the body and mind get very still, the need for oxygen is so low that you can breathe through your skin. But whatever is going on, physically there is no harm in this. You are not going to die. No one ever has. So if this happens to you, work with it so you do not have a sense of panic. This is simply the mind-body complex getting very, very still. It is a good thing.

One thing that may happen in the fourth jhāna is that you will like it. If this happens you will fall back into the third jhāna. That is not a problem. Simply let go of the pleasantness, and you will be back in the fourth jhāna.

Practice going back and forth between the different jhānas. You develop a great deal of control over your mind in this way. But also remember that it takes a great deal of jhāna practice to see the whole terrain. And it takes a lot of jhāna practice to get to where we want to go, and that is an awakening.

We are replacing our sense desires with the more wholesome desire for stillness, serenity, concentration, and equanimity. This is an important step in our journey. This is the Buddha's dispassion. We are replacing our sense desires with something better, much better. It doesn't have the dangers inherent in sense desire. The sense desires are the leper's coal pit.

Summary

In this section, we started by discussing misunderstandings about jhāna, specifically:

1. Whether jhāna is required to attain an awakening. (Answer: yes.)
2. The four material jhānas.
3. The immaterial states.
4. The differences between jhāna in the Visuddhimagga and the Pāli Canon.
5. The issue of mistaking jhāna for awakening.

Then we described two methods for entering the first jhāna, how the hindrances disappear, how to get out of it if that is a problem, and how to work with it once you have attained it.

This was followed by instructions on how to enter the second, third and fourth jhānas in turn.

*Those with calm minds –
masterful,
mindful,
absorbed in jhāna –
clearly see Dhamma rightly,
Delighting in heedfulness,
calm,
seeing danger in heedlessness, they
– incapable of falling away –
are right in the presence of Unbinding. - [Iti 2.45]*

The Immaterial Attainments

“Again, with the complete surmounting of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of sensory impact, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that ‘space is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of infinite space. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of infinite space, aware that ‘consciousness is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of infinite consciousness. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of infinite consciousness, aware that ‘there is nothing,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of nothingness. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of nothingness, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra, to have become invisible to the Evil One by depriving Māra’s eye of its opportunity.

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the cessation of perception and feeling. And his taints are destroyed by his seeing with wisdom. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra, to have become invisible to the Evil One by depriving Māra’s eye of its

opportunity, and to have crossed beyond attachment to the world.” - [MN 25.16-20]

The four jhānas focus on the same topic - the breath - but the way they relate to the breath grows progressively more refined. Once the mind reaches the fourth jhāna, this can form the basis for the formless attainments. Here the relationship among the stages is reversed: All the formless attainments relate to their themes in the same way - with the equanimity and singleness of the fourth jhāna - but they focus on different themes.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*]

As noted previously, in the Pāli Canon these states are not called jhānas. The closest thing that we have to a name that the Buddha gave us is “the liberations that are peaceful and immaterial” [MN 6.10]. They are called variously “the immaterial states/realms/spheres/attainments,” and “the formless states/realms/spheres/attainments.” The Pāli word is “arupa.” The Pāli word “rupa” means “body” or “material” and the prefix “a” means “not,” so “arupa” means literally “not the body” or “not material.”

Some scholars say that the immaterial states are extensions of the fourth jhāna, but I believe is incorrect. The fourth jhāna is a material state, i.e., one in which you are aware of the body. In the arupas the sense of a body falls away. This is what makes them immaterial. Admittedly this is somewhat academic. If it helps you to think of the immaterial states as extensions of the fourth jhāna, that is fine.

However you categorize them, they are states of ever-deeper concentration. Thus it is credible to call them jhānas.

Attaining The Base of Infinite Space

“Again, with the complete surmounting of perceptions of form, with the disappearance of perceptions of sensory impact, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that ‘space is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of infinite space. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...” - [MN 25.16]

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt.

- [William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1 Scene 2]

You may find that at times you fall into this state naturally. However, I am going to explain how to attain the base of infinite space from the fourth jhāna.

First, let me make a brief comment about the word “attain.” If you are familiar with the language of Zen, you know that in Zen they distance themselves from this word. There is some sense to that. As noted in the instructions for attaining the first jhāna, you must let go of any desire to enter it. You cannot force it to happen. This is true for much of the path. You apply mindfulness, awareness, and ardency to the object of contemplation, and the fruits of the practice arise on their own.

However, it is an attainment, and the Buddha used this word frequently. There are steps in this path. You develop skills. You see signs when the practice produces results. In the Four Noble Truths each truth has an activity associated with it. Dukkha is to be comprehended. Clinging is to be abandoned. Cessation is to be realized. The path is to be developed.

A word that may work better for some people is “enter,” i.e., you enter each jhāna. But in fact the word that the Buddha used is “attainment.”

Another linguistic note is that at the time of the Buddha they did not have the notion of infinity. Semantically, the word in Pāli is “limitless” or “boundless.” However, most modern scholars use the term “infinity”

because we do have that notion, and it is accurate.

To enter the base of infinite space, start in the fourth jhāna. This must be quite stable. If it is not, keep practicing the fourth jhāna until you can get it stable.

Next, get in touch with the boundaries of your body.

Now begin to expand these boundaries. Expand the boundaries to the limit of the room. Expand them to the boundaries of the building. Then the property, the neighborhood, the town, the state, the country, the planet, outwards into space, and finally to the “infinite of space.” Just keep expanding and keep your attention on the sense of outward expansion.

There are two caveats. One is not to get wrapped up in any physical objects. This is what “the perception of diversity” means. This contemplation is about space. Every physical object in the universe is mostly space. If you had a good enough microscope and you looked at your body, it would be almost entirely empty. There would only be a few tiny particles here and there. This realm is the infinity of space, not the objects in it:

As the mind in the fourth jhāna stays with the stillness of the breath filling the body, it begins to sense that the only reason it feels a boundary or form to the body is because of the perception or mental image of the body's form that it's been holding to. There is no movement of the breath to confirm that perception. Instead, the body feels like a cloud of mist droplets, each droplet a sensation, but with no clear boundary to the cloud.

To reach the first formless attainment, allow the perception of the form of the body to drop away. Then focus, not on the droplets of sensation, but on the space in-between them. This space then goes out beyond the

body without limit and can penetrate everything else. However, you don't try to trace it out to its limit. You simply hold in mind the perception of "infinite space" or "unlimited space." If you can stay there solidly, you reach the first formless attainment, the dimension of the infinitude of space.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*]

The second caveat is that you may find at certain points that you encounter resistance to the outward expansion. Just push through it. Keep focused on the sense of outward expansion.

In the immaterial realms you will not feel any sense of a body or a sense of self. The sense of a separate self disappears.

Attaining the Base of Infinite Consciousness

"Again, by completely surmounting the base of infinite space, aware that 'consciousness is infinite,' a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of infinite consciousness. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra..." - [MN 25.17]

When you attain the base of infinite space, you will see a subtle sense of an observer. There is the infinite space, and there is the awareness of the infinite space. In order to attain the base of infinite consciousness, you turn your attention to the awareness itself:

After you've become adept at staying with the perception of infinite space, you can pose the question, "What knows infinite space?" Your attention shifts to the awareness of the space, and you realize that the awareness, like the space, has no limits, although again you don't try to trace it out to its limits. You just stay centered where you are.

(If you try asking this question before you're adept at staying with the perception of infinite space, the mind will just revert to a lower level of concentration, or may leave concentration entirely. So go back to the perception of space.) If you can stay with that perception of infinite or unlimited awareness - or simply, "knowing, knowing, knowing" - you enter the second formless attainment, the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*]

In this case, the observed and the observer become one:

It's at this stage that your inner observer gets thrown into sharp relief. When you dropped the breath for the perception of "space," you gained a clear sense that your breath and your awareness of the breath were two separate things, and you could see precisely where and how they were separate. When you dropped the perception of "space," you could see that the awareness was separate even from space. As you carry your perception of "aware" into daily life, you can apply the same principle to everything that comes your way: Objects and events are one thing; the knowing awareness is something else.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*]

Leigh Brasington notes that people who have a theistic orientation often mistake this state for become one with God. This would be "atman" in Hindu terms, or a "higher power" in general terms. That is because there is a sense of oneness. When the distinction between the observed and the observer drops away, that may be how it feels if that is how you are predisposed. But this is not the end of the path. There is still more to go. This is simply awareness that if space is infinite, then that which is aware

of the infinite space must also be infinite.

The understanding that the immaterial attainments are not the final goal was one of the Buddha's great insights. His teachers were telling him that this was it, this was the final goal, final release. But he examined these states and decided that they are not the end, so he kept searching.

Attaining the Base of Nothingness

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of infinite consciousness, aware that ‘there is nothing,’ a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of nothingness. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra...” - [MN 25.18]

And now we turn the attention to what consciousness is conscious of, which is nothing.

Treat this with some care. As noted in the section on Right Mindfulness, the Buddha did not teach nihilism. The base of nothingness is not suggesting that ultimately nothing exists. Rather, more subtly, no “things” exist. That is why this is sometimes called the base of no-“thingness.” And now, as you drop the sense of oneness, what is left is nothing:

There's still awareness, but you're not labeling it as awareness. You're just with the sense of lightness that comes from replacing the label of “knowing” with something that feels less burdensome. The label of “knowing” requires that you make an effort to keep knowing. But the label of “nothing” allows you to put that burden down. If you can stay with that perception of, “There's nothing” or “Nothing's happening,” you enter the third formless attainment, the dimension of nothingness.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*]

Another way to look at the formless attainments, and indeed all of the jhānas, is that in each state we are asking the questions, “Where is there still stress? Where is there still a disturbance?” It is a radical form of stress reduction in increasingly subtle forms. In the case of the base of infinite consciousness, the stress is in the oneness, so you let go of it.

Attaining the Base of Neither Perception Nor Non-perception

“Again, by completely surmounting the base of nothingness, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra, to have become invisible to the Evil One by depriving Māra’s eye of its opportunity.” - [MN 25.19]

In the first seven jhānas, we use perception to see what is going on. Now you drop the perception itself:

After you’ve become adept at staying with the perception of “There’s nothing” or “Nothing’s happening,” you can ask yourself if there’s still any disturbance in that sense of nothingness. When you see that the disturbance is caused by the perception itself, you drop the perception. If you do this when your focus is not subtle enough, you’ll revert to a lower stage of concentration. But if you can stay in the mental space left empty by the perception when it falls away, that’s what you do. You can’t say that there’s another perception there, but because you have a non-verbal sense that you know where you are, you can’t say that there’s no perception, either. If you can continue staying there, you enter the fourth formless attainment,

the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

- [Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *With Each and Every Breath*]

The eighth jhāna is unique in that you cannot discern what is happening when you are in that state. You have to come out of the eighth jhāna to analyze it and to have insights. In the other jhānas, because perception is there, insights will arise when you are in them.

Perception is our ability to identify or name things. The mind takes raw input like colors and shapes and sounds and texture and interprets that input as “table,” “car passing by,” etc. In the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, however, that quality ceases. This makes it difficult to describe. You are in a state in which there are no characteristics by which you can describe it. This is why it is a state of “non-perception.” But it is also a state that can be described as being not describable, which is the quality of “perception.” Thus the state exists in an undefined realm between perception and non-perception.

In each state we look for the stress or disturbance and we look to abandon that stress. It is also a process of simplification. While they are attainments, they can also be called “abandonments.” We start with the first jhāna that is full of activity, and step-by-step we abandon mental phenomena, the stress gets less, and we get to a point of extreme simplification in mental activity.

Summary

In this section we have looked at how to enter the immaterial attainments:

1. The base of infinite space
2. The base of infinite consciousness
3. The base of nothingness
4. The base of neither perception nor non-perception

VI. The Unconditioned

The Buddhist Cosmology

The whole situation becomes multiplied further to dimensions beyond calculation when we take into account the Buddha's disclosure of the fact of rebirth. All beings in whom ignorance and craving remain present wander on in the cycle of repeated existence, saṃsāra, in which each turn brings them the suffering of new birth, aging, illness, and death. All states of existence within saṃsāra, being necessarily transitory and subject to change, are incapable of providing lasting security. Life in any world is unstable, it is swept away, it has no shelter and protector, nothing of its own (MN 82.36).

- [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Introduction]

The teachings on rebirth are as central to the Buddha's teachings as those on jhāna.

As we saw in the story of the night of the Buddha's awakening, two of his three realizations had to do with rebirth. The first was his ability to see his past lives. The second was his ability to see how beings are reborn according to their karma.

Rebirth has run into a cultural stonewall in the West. On one hand, we have religious Westerners who believe in one physical life and one eternal afterlife. On the other hand, we have philosophical materialists who only believe in the observable, physical universe. The latter believe that when life ends, it ends.

The Buddha called the first idea "eternalism" and the second one

“annihilationism.” He rejected them both. Rather, he said, we are born and reborn according to our karma, and the rounds of rebirth and the suffering go on endlessly unless we break free from it. This is the goal of the practice, to free us from the rounds of rebirth.

(It is beyond the scope of this document to provide proof of rebirth, but if you want to delve into the subject, do an Internet search on the words “reincarnation” and “proof.” You can also read *The Little Book of Buddhist Rebirth*.)

When you hang around the Buddhist world long enough, particularly the monastic world where people do a lot of intensive meditation, you will hear stories about experiences in other realms. Ṭhānissaro tells a story about a monk who saw into his previous six lives one night.

We live in a vast and complex universe, and even the physical sciences are saying that we can't see most of it:

All the stars, planets and galaxies that can be seen today make up just 4 percent of the universe. The other 96 percent is made of stuff astronomers can't see, detect or even comprehend.

These mysterious substances are called dark energy and dark matter. Astronomers infer their existence based on their gravitational influence on what little bits of the universe can be seen, but dark matter and energy themselves continue to elude all detection.

“The overwhelming majority of the universe is: who knows?” explains science writer Richard Panek, who spoke about these oddities of our universe on Monday (May 9) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) here in Manhattan. “It's unknown for now, and possibly forever.”

- [Richard Panek, *The 4 Percent Universe*]

I mentioned in the chapter on causality the monk who asserts that the different realms exist in the same physical space, just at different vibrational frequencies. This is why some people can see ghosts, because ghosts live at a vibrational frequency that is close to the human realm. Some people also see devas, which are sort of lower level gods.

I know a meditation teacher who was in Thailand with a friend at the tenth anniversary of Ajahn Chah's death. This friend was taking pictures with her camera phone, but none of them came out properly. Even though it was a crystal clear day, they had these smudges on them, like raindrops. She tried everything to get a clear picture but nothing worked. Finally she showed the pictures to one of the monks who said, "Oh, those are the devas."



Figure: Devas at Ajahn Chah's Death Commemoration

The Stages of Awakening

"With the utter destruction of three fetters, he is a

stream-enterer, no longer subject to [rebirth in] the lower world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as his destination...

“With the utter destruction of three fetters and with the diminishing of greed, hatred, and delusion, he is a once-returned who, after coming back to this world only one more time, will make an end of suffering...

“With the utter destruction of the five lower fetters, he is one of spontaneous birth, due to attain final nibbāna there without returning from that world...

“With the destruction of the taints, he realizes for himself with direct knowledge, in this very life, the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, and having entered upon it, he dwells in it.” - [AN 3.86]

According to the Buddha there are four stages to awakening:

1. **Stream-entry** (Pāli: sotāpanna) - A stream-enterer is a person who has “entered the stream” that flows inevitably to nirvāṇa (Pāli: nibbāna). A stream-enterer will attain a full awakening within seven lifetimes at most, and in the interim is not reborn in any of the lower realms.
2. **Once-returned** (Pāli: sakadāgāmin) - A once-returned will be reborn in the human realm no more than one more time before attaining a full awakening.
3. **Non-returned** (Pāli: anāgāmi) - A non-returned is not reborn in the human realm before attaining awakening, being reborn instead into the “heaven of the Pure Abodes.”
4. **Full-awakening** (Pāli: arahant) - A fully awakened/liberated being who is free from suffering. The Third Noble Truth is realized.

You define each stage of awakening by how many “fetters” are overcome. There are ten fetters, five lower fetters and five higher fetters. A stream-enterer overcomes the first three of the lower fetters. These are:

1. **Self-identity view** - That is, the identification with the aggregates (body, feelings, perception, mental formations and consciousness) as a “self.”
2. **Doubt** - This is doubt or uncertainty in the Buddha’s teachings.
3. **Attachment to rites and rituals** - This probably had to do with the brahmin belief that the proper performance of religious rites by the priests leads to a happy rebirth.

A once-returner weakens the next two lower fetters:

4. **Sense-desire**
5. **Ill-will**

A non-returner overcomes these fetters entirely.

An arahant overcomes the five higher fetters:

6. **Desire for a material rebirth** - This is rebirth in one of the physical realms.
7. **Desire for an immaterial rebirth** - This is rebirth in one of the immaterial realms.
8. **Restlessness** - For those of you are restless in your meditation, note that this is not eliminated until a final awakening, so go easy on yourself.
9. **Ignorance** - most especially the Four Noble Truths, in the entirety of their meaning.
10. **Conceit**

While at stream-entry you eliminate self-identification with the aggregates, what happens is still self-referential. There is still a sense that “I” am doing the abandoning. An arahant does not have this notion. An arahant would not think “I am an arahant,” only that the attainment of liberation occurred. This is sometimes simply called “knowing.”

I skipped over the desire for rebirth in the material and the immaterial realms. These will become clear in the next section where we discuss the Buddhist cosmology.

The Buddhist Cosmology

“But how is it, Master Gotama, are there gods?”

“It is known to me to be the case, Bhāradvāja, that there are gods.” - [MN 100.42]

What follows may seem caught somewhere between science fiction and pure fantasy. Make of it what you will. A few years ago I heard a talk by Bhikkhu Bodhi on this topic, and midway through it someone asked him, rather incredulously, “Do you think this is true?” His response was, “I think something like this is true.”

The cosmology as we understand it was formalized in the centuries after the Buddha’s death. He never gave a discourse on the topic. However, many of the realms described here show up in his discourses. The rest of them come from later works like the *Abhidharma* and the *Visuddhimagga*.

However, there is this passage that lists a number of realms in the “Kevaddha Sutta: About Kevaddha - What Brahmā Didn’t Know” [DN 11]:

...Once, Kevaddha, in this order of monks the thought occurred to a certain monk: “I wonder where the four great elements - the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the air element - cease without remainder.” And that monk attained to such a state of mental concentration that the way to the deva-realms appeared before him.

Then, coming to the Realm of the devas of the Four Great

Kings, he asked those devas: "Friends, where do the four great elements - earth, water, fire and air - cease without remainder?" At this question the devas of the Four Great Kings said to him: "Monk, we don't know where the four great elements cease without remainder. But the Four Great Kings are loftier and wiser than we are. They may know where the four great elements cease..."

So that monk went to the Four Great Kings and asked the same question, but they replied: "We don't know, but the Thirty-Three Gods may know..."

So that monk went to the Thirty-Three Gods, who said: "We don't know, but Sakka, lord of the gods, may know..."

Sakka, lord of the gods, said: "The Yāma devas may know..."

The Yama devas said: "Suyāma, son of the devas, may know..."

Suyama said: "The Tusita devas may know..."

The Tusita devas said: "Santusita, son of the devas, may know..."

Santusita said: "The Nimmanarati devas may know..."

The Nimmanarati devas said: "Sunimmita, son of the devas, may know..."

Sunimitta said: "The Paranimmita-Vasavatti devas may know..."

The Paranimmita-Vasavatti devas said: “Vasavatti, son of the devas, may know...”

Vasavatti said: “The devas of Brahmā’s retinue may know...”

Then that monk, by the appropriate concentration, made the way to the Brahmā world appear before him. He went to the devas of Brahmā’s retinue and asked them. They said: “We don’t know. But there is Brahmā, Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. He is loftier and wiser than we are. He would know where the four great elements cease without remainder.” - [DN 11.67-80]

(He didn’t know.)

Here the Buddha walked us through the heavenly realms up to and including the Brahmā realm, “Brahmā” being the supreme god.

There are eight discourses in the *Majjhima Nikāya* that mention the Buddhist cosmology, five in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, etc., so this cosmological reference is not the only one.

The final cosmology is a little suspicious because there are 31 realms plus the unconditioned realm, making 32, and 32 is a sort of magic number in ancient India. For example, they believed that a “great man” would have 32 marks. So the inference is that the cosmology was modified to fit that number. However, as Bhikkhu Bodhi states, it is probably something like this.

Practically, the most important point is that we live in these realms, being born and reborn and reborn, over and over again. Each time we are reborn according to our karma, and more precisely the karma that

manifests at the time of rebirth. Thus, as already noted, karma is not deterministic, but probabilistic. Having a lot of good karma improves the odds, but it is no guarantee.

Further, even a good rebirth has its dangers. Beings in the heavenly realms are prone to conceit and arrogance, feelings of superiority over other beings, and this leads to lower rebirths. It is the inevitable fall from grace. Thus we move up and down through the realms like moving through the floors of a building. The upper floors are happy rebirths, and the floors below ground are unhappy rebirths.

What makes this so fundamental to the Buddha's teachings is that we are playing a very dangerous game of roulette. At stake is infinite rebirths up and down this cosmic building. Inevitably we are reborn into undesirable realms. Even the human realm, which is a good rebirth, is, well, look around you. Turn on the news. It's not so great.

So while good karma and a good rebirth are certainly better than bad karma and a bad rebirth, the only way out is to attain an awakening. It is the only way to free yourself from being thrashed about somewhat randomly, deposited here and there through infinite time, which is what has happened to us so far.

This understanding also should increase compassion for others and decrease our own arrogance. We have been in all the realms an infinite number of times. Everyone you see who is poor, starving, sick, a murderer, a drug addict, ruthless, mean, whatever it might be, we have all been there, we have all been that person. As the Christians would say, "There but for the grace of God go I." And without attaining an awakening, you will be right back there some day. Maybe you are there now.

The Mahāyāna traditions accuse the Theravāda of being self-centered, of only seeking their own happiness and liberation. We have already seen that this is not true, that as the Buddha said, the best way to practice is for others and ourselves. And the more skillful your practice becomes,

the more benefit you are to the people around you. It is not possible to do this practice properly and not be of benefit. We do a lot of damage through our unskillful behavior. Even someone who has a very advanced practice is still feeding and consuming.

I heard Ayya Khema make an interesting comment once. Ayya Khema, I believe most people think, was an arahant. Her comment was that when you become an arahant, after your physical death, what is called “parinibbāna” in Pāli, you become part of the fabric of the universe in a way that contributes to the greater good of all beings. Your arahantship lifts everyone up throughout all time and space.

This demonstrates the supreme importance of awakening. The Mahāyāna Buddhists emphasize full awakening only after all beings are free. This is probably because in the first millennium in India, when it was a Buddhist country, there were some selfish monks and nuns. The Mahāyāna Buddhists wanted to emphasize altruism and to make that a centerpiece of their practice.

But the Buddha did not teach this, and you can certainly believe what Ayya Khema intimates is true. It would be consistent with the spirit of the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha was someone in whom extreme, pure altruism manifested. He was incapable of teaching a path that was not for the benefit of all beings.

The Buddha famously only taught what is necessary to attain an awakening. We have seen how he refused to answer certain questions, such as whether or not the self exists, because they were of no benefit. In the *Samyutta Nikāya* there is this famous passage:

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Kosambī in a siṃsapā grove. Then the Blessed One took up a few siṃsapā leaves in his hand and addressed the bhikkhus thus: “What do you think, bhikkhus, which is more numerous: these few siṃsapā leaves that I have taken up in my hand or those in the siṃsapā grove

overhead?”

“Venerable sir, the siṃsapā leaves that the Blessed One has taken up in his hand are few, but those in the siṃsapā grove overhead are numerous.”

“So too, bhikkhus, the things I have directly known but have not taught you are numerous, while the things I have taught you are few. And why, bhikkhus, have I not taught those many things? Because they are unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. Therefore I have not taught them.” - [SN 56.31]

The Buddha was not hiding anything from us. There is no double secret probation in the Buddha’s teachings. There is no punch line that you have to figure out for yourself. The Buddha fixated on one thing and that was showing us the way out.

I heard this story on The West Wing years ago. A man falls into a manhole. Whenever he sees someone walk by, he calls for help. Finally someone stops, looks down into the hole, and jumps in. “What did you do that for?” the man asks. “Now we are both stuck down here.” “Yes,” said the other man, “But I have been down here, and I know the way out.”

The Buddha was not a god. He was a human being. He was subject to all the same stresses and problems that we all face. He has been down here, and he knows the way out.

It does take faith to do this practice. A lot of people don’t want to hear that. But it isn’t blind faith. With experience you develop “confirmed confidence.” You see it for yourself. But the unconditioned realm is not

describable in conventional terms of time and space. When you become a stream-enterer then you see what the Buddha said is true. But along the way, as you see the teachings manifest, as you see yourself becoming happier and more skillful, your confidence grows.

You may hear that it is only possible to awaken in the human realm, that the human realm is the only one that has the right balance between suffering and happiness. In the lower realms there is too much suffering to practice, and in the upper realms it is too pleasant, so there is not enough incentive to practice.

The Buddha never said this. We already know that some beings are practicing in the upper realms because non-returners have to be. There are happier realms, and they may be more conducive to practice because you don't have to worry about mowing the lawn or overdrawing your checking account.

The Realms of Existence

The Buddhist cosmology, as pieced together from various sources, looks like this:

World	Realm	Notes	Lifespan
Formless world ("arūpa-loka")	Neither perception nor non-perception	Equivalent to the immaterial jhānas	84,000 aeons
	Nothingness		60,000 aeons
	Infinite consciousness		40,000 aeons
	Infinite space		20,000 aeons
Fine material world ("rūpa-loka")	The Supreme/peerless	Place of rebirth for non-returners	16,000 aeons
	The Clear-sighted		8,000 aeons
	The Lovely/beautiful		4,000 aeons
	The Serene/untroubled		2,000 aeons
	The Durable/"not falling away"		1,000 aeons
	The Unconscious	Body only, no mind	500 aeons
	Great reward/very fruitful	fourth jhāna	500 aeons
	Refulgent glory/complete beauty	third jhāna	65 aeons
	Boundless beauty		32 aeons
	limited beauty		16 aeons
	Streaming radiance	second jhāna	8 aeons
	Boundless radiance		4 aeons
	Limited radiance		2 aeons
	Great Brahmā	first jhāna	1 aeons
	Brahmā's ministers		1/2 aeons
Brahmā's retinue	1/3 aeons		
Sense-desire world ("kamā-loka")	Masters of the creation of others	devas	16,000 celestial years
	Those who delight in creation		8,000 celestial years
	The contented		4,000 celestial years
	The Yama gods		2,000 celestial years
	The thirty-three gods		1,000 celestial years
	The four great kings		500 celestial years
	Human		you are here
	Jealous gods	states of misery	
	Hungry ghosts		
	animals		
	hell		

Figure: Realms in the Buddhist Cosmology

So here is the nickel tour.

The word "aen" is the English translation of the Sanskrit word "kalpa" (Pāli: kappa). In both Hinduism and Buddhism, a kalpa is a life of the universe, i.e., the time between the creation and recreation of a universe. Note that Western scientists only started to believe in a cyclical model of

the universe in the 1980's.

A celestial year is 360 celestial days. A celestial day equals 50 human years in the lowest heaven ("the four great kings") and doubles with each level. In other words, it's a long time.

So starting from the top down, if when you die you have mastered the eighth jhāna, the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, you will be reborn into the highest formless world and be there for 84,000 aeons. And so on down the line to the heavenly realm of Brahmā's retinue, which is the lowest heavenly realm that corresponds to a mastery of jhāna. Thus there is a mapping between the human mind and human consciousness and the highest 20 heavenly realms.

Just below that are the six heavenly realms of the devas. Devas are lower-level gods, similar to humans, but happier, longer-lived, and more powerful. Because devas are close to human beings in the hierarchy, there are people who can see them. Bhikkhu Bodhi says that at the monastery in Sri Lanka where he was, there was a valley next to the monastery where lots of devas lived. Some of the monks could see them. Tradition also holds that devas know where they are not welcome, or where human beings are not well-behaved, so it is unlikely that devas live in places that lack compassion and kindness. They're not hanging around Walmart, Trump Towers, or hedge fund managers.

Going below the human realm, you can see the places where you don't want to go. These realms also map to human consciousness. Hell maps to anger in human consciousness. You probably know people who are angry all the time. This is the hell realm manifesting in a human life.

The amount of time someone spends in a hell realm depends on their karma. A basically good person who has some bad karma manifesting may be there for a brief time. Someone who is especially cruel will be there for a very long time, perhaps aeons. (Think "Nazis.")

There are those who believe that Christians got their notion of hell from Buddhism. You may also have heard that in Jesus' lost 40 days in the

desert that he went to India where Buddhism influenced him. Buddhism was in its hey-day in India at that time, pre-dating Jesus life by about 400 years. Many early Christians, including St. Augustine, believed in reincarnation.

The primary characteristic of the animal realm is that animals only behave according to their nature. Lions are lions, and monkeys are monkeys, and alligators are alligators. You also see this at play in the human world where some people do not exercise any filters or judgment in their behavior. One of the qualities that we cultivate in our practice is the ability to exercise choice, not to be victims of our thoughts, emotions, and compulsions.

Hungry ghosts (Pāli: peta) have unquenchable desire. They are usually depicted with huge stomachs and very small throats. Their hunger is never satisfied. This is a metaphor for all types of desire. You may know people like this. No matter how much they have, it is never enough. People like this are never happy. They are never contented. They are hungry ghosts living in the human realm, and they may be reborn in the hungry ghost realm.



Figure: Hungry ghosts

Hungry ghosts play an important part in the Buddha's teaching. The foundation of the path is generosity. Generosity is the feeling that you have more than enough, so much so that you can give it away. All of our conditioned experience - the prison of saṃsāra in which we find ourselves - is because we are constantly feeding, wanting, craving and clinging, and generosity is the antidote for that.

And finally there are the the jealous gods, the demigods:

The jealous gods (Pāli: asura) are self-absorbed, egotistical, violent, angry with everyone, always looking for a fight. They are addicted to their passions. The Zen patriarch Zhiyi says this about the asuras: "Always desiring to be superior to others, having no patience for inferiors and belittling strangers; like a hawk, flying high

above and looking down on others, and yet outwardly displaying justice, worship, wisdom, and faith - this is raising up the lowest order of good and walking the way of the Asuras.” - [Wikipedia]

They are the bullies of the cosmos.

Implications of the Buddhist Cosmology

There are many implications to looking at existence from this perspective. For example, you may find that parts of your temperament are problematic. Whatever quality it is, it may be manifesting as its opposite from a previous life. The Buddhist tradition famously holds that stinginess manifests as poverty, and wealth manifests from generosity.

Another example is that some people, no matter how knowledgeable they are, find that others tend not to find them credible. This is from past karma. People who lied a lot in a previous life will have this quality manifesting.

This is not intended to make us more judgmental. It just puts everything into a bigger space. And remember, it does not imply that someone is inherently superior or inferior, only that a particular type of karma is manifesting. The Buddha never talked in terms of a person. He only described results and their causes. It is somewhat clinical in that way.

It also helps us to dis-identify with such traits. If you see such a trait, you can be a little more accepting of it. Of course, you want to work with it and cultivate virtue. But if it is a strong part of your temperament, it may not go away.

There is a story about Ajahn Chah and a layperson who had known him for ten years. One day Ajahn Chah mentioned that he had an inherently angry temperament. The layperson was very surprised and said that he had never seen Ajahn Chah get angry. Ajahn Chah responded that while the anger arose, “It has nowhere to go.” That is a skillful way to cultivate

the mind.

Our relationships may also have karmic roots in a previous life. You may meet people who have strong negative responses to you even though you have done nothing to warrant that. That may be the result of past karma. Or you may find yourself strongly drawn to someone, likewise for no discernible reason. The Buddhist tradition also holds that we are born to our parents because of karmic links. These may be good or bad.

It is important to remember that we don't really know. The Buddha himself said that if you try to understand all the causes and conditions that have a certain result, you will go mad [AN 4.77]. But it can be helpful to know that when seemingly inexplicable events happen, they may be karmically rooted.

Existence is like a big prison. In this prison, there is maximum security, medium security, solitary confinement, chain gangs, minimum security, and the whole range of incarceration. Minimum security may not be so bad, but it is still prison. And eventually you will end up on a chain gang, anyway.

If you are in prison, you want to get out. At least, I think you do, although some people don't.

Given the scale and the scope of limitless time, you do not just get to write your own ticket. You don't get to dictate all of your rebirths through time and space. The only safety is to get out of the complex and unpredictable sphere of causes and conditions

This is about the really big picture. This path is not just about dealing with an unhappy job or being a little less stressed out on the drive to work or making up with your significant other. The stakes are enormous. The whole of existence is full of risks. It is all a bit of a crapshoot. We can improve the odds, but there are never any guarantees. The Buddha's final words before his passing were these:

Then the Lord said to the monks: "Now, monks, I declare

to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay - strive on untiringly.” These were the Tathāgata’s last words. - [DN 16.6.7]

Summary

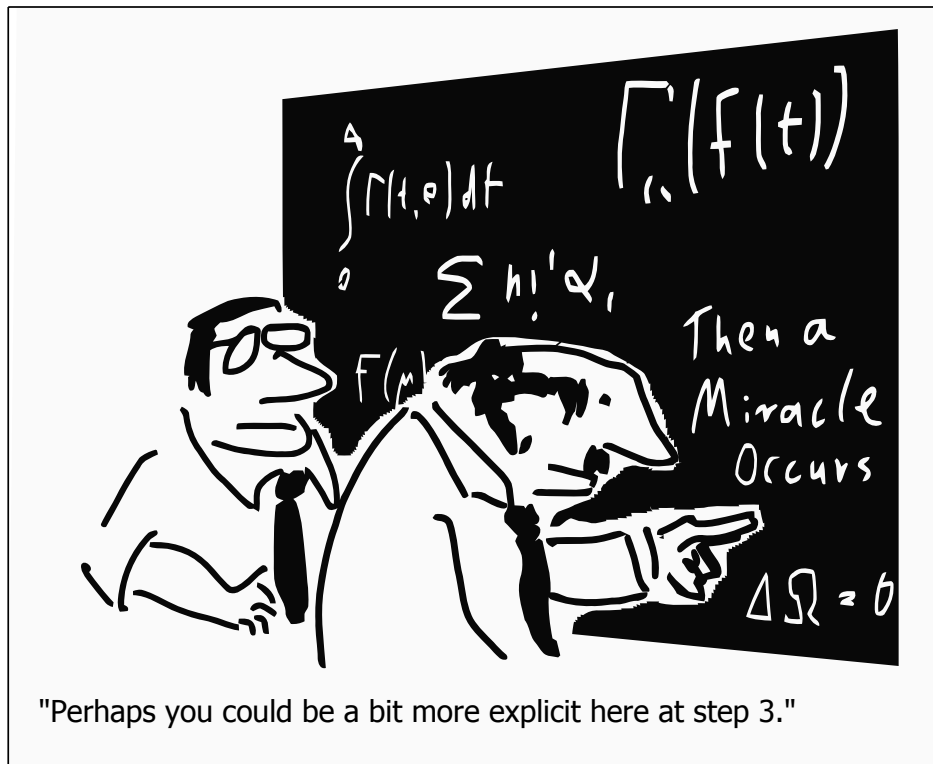
In this section we saw how the teachings on rebirth are central to the Buddha’s path. We discussed the stages of awakening:

1. Stream-entry
2. Once-returner
3. Non-returner
4. Arahant

We discussed the 31 realms of existence (plus nirvāṇa/nibbāna, making 32), and how we are born and reborn according to our karma.

And finally we discussed some of the implications of rebirth, how our karma may be playing out in this lifetime. Most importantly, the rounds of rebirth are uncertain and we should “strive on untiringly” to awaken, for this is the only guarantee of freedom.

Awakening and Nirvāṇa



For the first 20 years of my practice I thought awakening was like this cartoon. Practice Method One was to sit and sit and sit, and after a while a miracle would occur. Practice Method Two was to watch whatever arises, to just be with it, and a miracle would occur. No one connected the dots for me. How do you go from a breath awareness practice to opening to the deathless dimension? “Opening to the deathless” sounds ominous, and I felt like I was trying to build a house without any construction skills or a blueprint.

Fortunately, the Buddha gave us good instructions on how to awaken. Admittedly, the instruction manual is pretty long but everything you need is there.

What is Nirvāṇa?

The word “nirvāṇa” literally means “to extinguish.” The “Three Poisons”

in early Buddhism were also called “The Three Fires.” [Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*] Thus one definition of nirvāṇa is “extinguishing the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion.” Once the mind extinguishes the fires, it does not create any new karma. It is incapable of greed, hatred, and delusion. It is only motivated by generosity, love, compassion, and wisdom.

The Buddha focused on the process whereby the mind attains this experience. Thus the word “nirvāṇa” is more a verb than a noun. It is not a state of mind in which one exists. It is an experience, after which the mind is free from suffering and the rounds of rebirth. To use the often-quoted phrase, the mind is “nirvāṇa-ed,” or “nirvāṇized.” There is still old karma to work out but no new karma is created. When the body dies it is no longer subject to the rounds of rebirth. One enters the realm of the unconditioned. This distinguishes it from the rest of the cosmology where all the realms are conditioned:

“There is, bhikkhus, that base where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air; no base consisting of the infinity of space, no base consisting of the infinity of consciousness, no base consisting of nothingness, no base consisting of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor another world nor both; neither sun nor moon. Here, bhikkhus, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering.” – [Ud 80]

Now we are dealing with the transcendent. It is beyond any conventional experience of time and space. Our normal frames of reference do not apply. In the “Aggivacchagotta Sutta: To Vacchagotta on Fire” [MN 72] the Buddha used the simile of fire to make this point:

“If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: ‘When that fire before you was extinguished, to which direction did it go:

to the east, the west, the north, or the south?' - being asked thus, what would you answer?"

"That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel, it is reckoned as extinguished."

"So too, Vaccha, the Tathāgata has abandoned that material form by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from reckoning in terms of material form, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the ocean. 'He reappears' does not apply; 'he does not reappear' does not apply; 'he both reappears and does not reappear' does not apply; 'he neither reappears nor does not reappear' does not apply. The Tathāgata has abandoned that feeling by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him... has abandoned that perception by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him... has abandoned those formations by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him... has abandoned that consciousness by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from reckoning in terms of consciousness, Vaccha; he is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the ocean." - [MN 72.20]

The Buddha famously refused to answer certain philosophical questions. We have already seen that he refused to answer the question of whether

the self exists. The nature of an arahant (or “Tathāgata,” as in the quote) after death is another such issue. These questions are called “The Unanswered Questions,” or “The Unfathomable Questions” (Sanskrit *avyākṛta*, Pāli: *avyākata* - “unfathomable, unexpounded”). The Buddha went even further to say that holding a view or an opinion on these questions will actually keep us from awakening. In the “Nivāpa Sutta: The Bait” [MN 25] he compared anyone who holds such views to a deer that is trapped by hunters, where the views are the bait:

“But then they came to hold views such as ‘the world is eternal’ and ‘the world is not eternal’ and ‘the world is finite’ and ‘the world is infinite’ and ‘the soul and the body are the same’ and ‘the soul is one thing and the body another’ and ‘after death a Tathāgata exists’ and ‘after death a Tathāgata does not exist’ and ‘after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist’ and ‘after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist’ That is how those recluses and brahmins of the third kind failed to get free from Māra’s power and control.” - [MN 25.12]

The Buddha told us to remain focused on solving the problem of suffering and warned against trying to characterize the uncharacterizable. It’s a waste of time (and space) and a deterrent for our goal. Nonetheless, even during his lifetime monks tried to anyway, and he reprimanded them for doing so. [SN 22.85, SN 22.86]. So, of course, speculation on the unconditioned has continued to the present day. You can lead a horse to water, as the saying goes.

The more important questions are a) do I want it and b) how do I get there?

As to the first question, the Buddha assured us in the strongest possible terms that the answer is “yes”:

“Bhikkhus, suppose there were a man with a lifespan of a hundred years, who could live a hundred years. Someone would say to him: ‘Come, good man, in the morning they will strike you with a hundred spears; at noon they will strike you with a hundred spears; in the evening they will strike you with a hundred spears. And you, good man, being struck day after day by three hundred spears will have a lifespan of a hundred years, will live a hundred years; and then, after a hundred years have passed, you will make the breakthrough to the Four Noble Truths, to which you had not broken through earlier.’

“It is fitting, bhikkhus, for a clansman intent on his good to accept the offer.” - [SN 56.35]

As to the second question, the answer is the Noble Eightfold Path.

We also discussed another way to define nirvāṇa, and that is in terms of the ten fetters. And still another way to understand it is cessation, as in the Third Noble Truth:

“And what, friends, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving. This is called the noble truth of the cessation of suffering.” - [MN 141.22]

Cessation here means the cessation of craving. The chain of dependent co-arising is broken. One who is fully awakened does not feed the chain of causation. This is because ignorance, which is at the root of the chain of dependent co-arising, is cut off. The ignorance is replaced by direct, clear, knowledge:

“He fully understands by direct knowledge those things that should be fully understood by direct knowledge. He

abandons by direct knowledge those things that should be abandoned by direct knowledge. He develops by direct knowledge those things that should be developed by direct knowledge. He realizes by direct knowledge those things that should be realized by direct knowledge.” – [MN 149.10]

While the word “knowledge” is used here, a more appropriate term is “knowing.” “Knowledge” is something you spit back on a test. It is a piece of information. “Knowing” is something that you experience directly. “Knowledge” is when the Battle of Hastings was fought. “Knowing” is how you felt when you got your driver’s license.

The Buddha also defined the end of the path as the destruction of the taints:

“I have proclaimed to my disciples the way whereby by realizing for themselves with direct knowledge, they here and now enter upon and abide in the deliverance of mind and deliverance by wisdom that are taintless with the destruction of the taints. And thereby many disciples of mine abide having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge.” - [MN 77.36]

The taints are 1) sense desire, 2) becoming, and 3) ignorance.

Thus there are a number of ways by which the end of the path is understood:

1. The extinguishing of greed, hatred, and delusion.
2. The destruction of the fetters.
3. The cessation of craving.
4. The destruction of the taints.

The realm is variously called “the deathless,” “the unconditioned,” the “unborn, unaging, unailing,” etc. The attainment is called

“enlightenment,” “liberation,” “release” and “awakening.” The term “enlightenment” fell out of favor in the West because it is confused with the Age of Enlightenment. But you hear all of these terms, and they all have some justification for their use. I generally use the term “awakening” to describe the experience. You awaken to transcendent understanding, direct, clear knowing. And I tend to use “the unconditioned” to define the realm. But the preferred terms are somewhat a case of tomatato, tomahto.

Misconceptions About Awakening

There are some common misconceptions about awakening that are worth addressing.

As noted, attaining the first stage of awakening, stream-entry, causes a fundamental change in the mind. This is why a stream-enterer attains a full awakening in no more than seven lifetimes. Even the uncertainties of rebirth do not cause the mind to lose its positive, karmic momentum. The change is permanent.

There is a popular book that suggests that stream-entry is no big deal, and that after you awaken you just go back to the mundane activities of life. This is not correct. You are never the same after attaining stream-entry, and that is a very good thing.

You also see the quote that a “moment of mindfulness is a moment of awakening.” This “is something the Buddha would never say, because mindfulness is conditioned and nirvāṇa is not.” [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “[Mindfulness Defined](#)”] Stream-entry is somewhat trivialized in the West. Attaining stream-entry is not easy, and when it happens to you, it is a pivotal moment in your existence.

But even if you do not attain stream-entry in this lifetime, it is important to set it as a goal. Even the aspiration for stream-entry makes you a member of the noble Saṅgha:

The noble Saṅgha consists of eight types of noble persons, who are joined into four pairs in relation to the four stages of awakening. The two members of each pair are the one who has attained the stage itself and the one who has entered the path leading irreversibly toward that stage. They are stated concisely thus: “The stream-enterer, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of stream-entry; the once-returner, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of once-returning; the non-returner, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of non-returning; the arahant, the one practicing for realization of the fruit of arahantship.

- [Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Introduction]

And, once again, a stream-enterer is incapable of breaking the precepts:

Again, some person fulfills virtuous behavior but cultivates concentration and wisdom only to a moderate extent. With the utter destruction of three fetters, this person is a seven-times-at-most attainer who, after roaming and wandering on among devas and humans seven times at most, makes an end of suffering. This is the ninth person, passing away with a residue remaining, who is freed from hell, the animal realm, and the sphere of afflicted spirits; freed from the plane of misery, the bad destination, the lower world. - [AN 9.12.6]

The phrase “fulfills virtuous behavior” is sometimes translated as “accomplished in the precepts.” So if you know anyone who claims to be a stream-enterer, and they lie, steal, manipulate, commit acts of sexual misconduct, or any other breach of ethical conduct, then you know that they are not.

Personality and Temperament

Thānissaro Bhikkhu tells a story about a woman who read the Buddha's teachings on non-self, and when she visited the monastery she was disappointed to find out that the monks had personalities.

In fact, our true personalities don't have a chance to emerge because they are obscured by greed, aversion, and delusion. If you are angry a lot of the time, the gentler aspects of your personality do not manifest. Negative mind states are powerful, and they overwhelm the positive ones.

We all have different temperaments and different karmas. This means that our paths to awakening and how awakening manifests in each one of us is unique. In the sutta "Foremost" [AN 1.188-267] there are seven chapters. Four are devoted to monks, and one each are devoted to nuns, lay men, and lay women. In each chapter, the Buddha listed who among that group were foremost in a particular quality:

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples in seniority is Aññakoṇḍañña.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with great wisdom is Sāriputta.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with psychic potency is Mahāmogallāna.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those who expound the ascetic practices is Mahākassapa.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with the divine eye is Anuruddha.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those from eminent families is Bhaddiya

Kāligodhāyaputta.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with a sweet voice is Lakunṭaka Bhaddiya.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those with the lion's roar is Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those who speak on the Dhamma is Puṇṇa Mantāṇiputta.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhu disciples among those who explain in detail the meaning of what has been stated in brief is Mahākaccāna. – [AN 1.188-197]

(And so on for three more chapters.)

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples in seniority is Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those with great wisdom is Khemā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those with psychic potency is Uppalavaṇṇā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who uphold the discipline is Paṭācārā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among speakers on the Dhamma is Dhammadinnā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among meditators is Nandā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among

those who arouse energy is Soṇā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those with the divine eye is Sakulā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who quickly attain direct knowledge is Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who recollect past lives is Bhaddā Kāpilānī.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who attain great direct knowledge is Bhaddā Kaccānā.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those who wear coarse robes is Kisāgotamī.

Bhikkhus, the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples among those resolved through faith is Sigālamātā. – [AN 235-247]

(Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was the Buddha's stepmother, the one who raised him.)

The sutta continues with lay people.

We all come to the Dharma in a different way, and the Dharma expresses itself in each of us in a different way.

Ajahn Chah once said, "We are all the same. But we are all different. But we are all the same."

We have the same disease, and it works the same way in all of us. But we all have unique temperaments, unique strengths and weaknesses, and

unique personalities. The precise door that we use to end our suffering will not be the same. The Buddha's two chief disciples were Moggallāna and Sāriputta. Although they were best friends, they were also quite different. As you can see in the sutta, Sāriputta was foremost in wisdom. Sāriputta would have made a great organic chemist or quantum physicist. Moggallana was foremost in psychic powers. He would have been a great fortune teller or magician, maybe a fantastic stockbroker.

One of the things that happens as you practice is that you stop self-identifying with your temperament. Whatever your temperament is some people will like it, some people won't like it, and some people won't care. It isn't who you are; it is just how you are constructed in this lifetime. On the path to awakening, you get to know it better, you learn how to make it work for you, and you stop worrying about whether it is good or bad or right or wrong.

I heard this story about a Zen Master and one of his students. The Zen Master had this dynamic personality, and the student was rather shy and retiring. One day the student asked his teacher, "If I become enlightened, will I be like you?" "No," the Master replied. "I was just born this way."

If you have bricks you build a brick house. If you have wood you build a wooden house.

Your path to awakening will not follow a precise formula. On the other hand, the end game is the same, and that is to end the process of fabrication. There is a map, but the map cannot tell you what your trip will be like or the precise route you will take.

Dispassion

We start in the world of sense desire, and the Buddha told us something that seems to go beyond all reason. It is something counter-intuitive. He told us that sense desire is at the heart of the problem.

As our practice evolves, we replace sense desire with the pleasure born of

seclusion, jhāna. Jhāna is peaceful, calm, serene, uncomplicated, and it does not have the dangers inherent in sense desire.

That is one of the things that the Buddha told us about sense desire, that there are dangers involved:

“Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I too clearly saw as it actually is with proper wisdom how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, but as long as I still did not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognised that I still could be attracted to sensual pleasures. But when I clearly saw as it actually is with proper wisdom how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, and I attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognised that I was no longer attracted to sensual pleasures.” - [MN 14.5]

Now we have something better, much better. And as we get better at practicing jhāna, we see for ourselves the danger in sense desire.

This evolves as your practice matures. When you see the danger in sense desire, you develop dispassion.

“And what have I declared? ‘This is suffering’ - I have declared. ‘This is the origin of suffering’ - I have declared. ‘This is the cessation of suffering’ - I have declared. ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’ - I have declared.

“Why have I declared that? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. That is why I have declared it.” - [MN 63.9-10]

We tend to think of passion as a good thing. The things about which we care the most are the things for which we have a passion. We may even think that we are passionate about the Dharma.

The passion about which the Buddha is speaking here is passion for sense desire and becoming: becoming both in the sense of self-identification as well as continued existence. Dispassion is akin to losing interest. As you see the problems in sense desire, and as you become more proficient in the superior pleasure of jhāna, they lose their appeal. You become bored with them. Likewise, as you see the risks and dangers in rebirth, you lose interest in becoming.

In the following very rich passage, Ṭhanissāro Bhikkhu defines the entire path as a process of developing dispassion:

Our experience of the present moment is composed of the results of past actions, or potentials coming in from our past actions, our present intentions, and the result of our present intentions. And we cling to all three things. We cling to the potentials coming in, we cling to the action whereby we are actualizing them, and we also cling to the results that we anticipate. We do this because we anticipate a great product from this.

The things we actually cling to are actions. The mind doesn't have a hand that can hold onto things, but it has certain ways of acting and thinking about things. And it will cling to a particular way of thinking, cling to a

particular way of engaging with the world. And the aggregates it's clinging to, these are actions as well. The Buddha defines feeling as the "act of feeling," the "act of perceiving," the "act of fabricating." Even "form," there is a lot of action in keeping this form going.

So the calculation is because these are actions, we have to put effort into them, are they worth the effort? And the Buddha's saying that in a lot of cases they're not, particularly when you look at the aggregates and sense media.

We feed these things, and then we feed off of them. We create these things because we are basically creating food for ourselves.

The analogy is that you've got chickens. And you feed the chickens because you want the eggs. And as long as the eggs are better than the chicken feed, it's worth it. So you keep it going. But it turns out with the aggregates, 1) they give good and bad eggs, and 2) if you are not really discerning, you are going to take everything that the chicken produces. We tend not to be very discerning. We don't see the connection between our actions, our cravings and clingings, and the suffering that comes from that. We put the food in, and we take whatever comes out.

The problem is that we are often poor judges of whether it's worth it or not, because we don't notice the fact that, as the Buddha says, we don't really feed off of the aggregates, but the aggregates chew us up. To continue with the chickens, not only do we feed the chickens, but the chickens come peck at us at nighttime. They are the

chickens from hell.

So the nature of the discernment that cures this problem itself is a fabrication and an action. We use fabrication to get to the unfabricated. It's also a value judgment. When is it worth it to feed the chickens and when is it not?

We are using the aggregates to create a state of concentration. In a case like that, it's worth feeding them. But if we are using the aggregates for other purposes, then maybe we are not getting the eggs out of the chicken. We are eating the chicken shit. So be careful.

And in the meantime, as we are doing this process of gaining discernment, we also have to provide alternative food for the mind. That's what the concentration is for, and learning how to take joy in generosity, joy in virtue, and the visceral sense of well-being that comes from the concentration, this is what feed you so you can look at your old ways of feeding and see that they are really not worth it. These chickens are giving bad eggs, so you can stop feeding those chickens.

The Buddha compares these things to a beverage in a bronze cup:

“Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a bronze cup of a beverage having a fine color, aroma, and taste, but it was mixed with poison. Then a man would come along, oppressed and afflicted by the heat, tired, parched, and thirsty. They would tell him: ‘Good man, this beverage in the bronze cup has a fine color, aroma, and taste, but it is mixed with poison. Drink it if you wish. If you drink it, it will gratify you with its

color, aroma, and taste, but by drinking it you will meet death or deadly suffering.’ Suddenly, without reflecting, he would drink the beverage — he would not reject it — and thereby he would meet death or deadly suffering.” - [SN II.12.66]

It’s a value judgment, and it’s a judgment of what’s worth feeding on and what’s not worth feeding on. That’s how discernment works; that’s how insight works. You’re passing judgment on things, on activities, to see if the effort that goes into maintaining this, creating this, feeding this, is actually worth the nourishment, or is it not worth the nourishment.

And the Buddha suggests that at that final point of practice you let go of everything. Up to that point you let go of things that are unskillful, things that are getting in the way of the path.

The first three truths have to do with dispassion. The third truth is dispassion, and the duties having to do with the second and first truths have to do with gaining dispassion for those truths. But for the path, you have to have passion for it. You have to be devoted to meditating, you have to be devoted to the practice of virtue and generosity, up to the point where you’ve fulfilled the path, then you develop dispassion for it as well.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, [March 2017 Retreat at BCBS on Awakening](#)]

Again, this is something that will evolve in your practice. You will be sitting, perhaps in jhāna, and a thought about sense desire will arise. That

will be followed by the thought, “Why would I want that?” There may be an aversion to it. The aversion may be quite strong. The Buddha sometimes used the word “revulsion.” The Pāli word is “nibbidā.” It is also rendered as “disenchantment” (as in the above quote) or “disgust.” “Revulsion” may sound too strong. However, when you experience it in your meditation, it may feel just like that.

The Many Moving Parts

“Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu develops right view, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. He develops right intention... right speech... right action... right livelihood... right effort... right mindfulness... right concentration, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release.” - [SN 45.2]

It is easy to get consumed by one part of the practice and to make that the whole of your practice. But this is a multifaceted practice with a lot of moving parts. We start with our conduct: virtue, ethics, and morality. We put our good conduct on a ground of generosity. We follow the lay precepts. Monks have over 200 precepts; nuns have over 300. We examine the results of our actions and try to do only what is skillful, what is of benefit to ourselves and others now and in the future. We work on our intention because skillful intention is the heart of good karma. In the Noble Eightfold Path parts three, four, and five are about right conduct.

Then we meditate. We have three major parts to meditation: the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of Breathing, and jhāna. We weave them together like three different colors of yarn into a whole tapestry. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness show us the lay of the land, the “frames of reference.” Mindfulness of Breathing takes us all the way to an awakening in the fourth tetrad. And jhāna starts as a challenging goal to attain and then becomes the springboard to stream-

entry. In the Noble Eightfold Path, parts six, seven, and eight are about meditation.

Right Understanding starts out as mundane right view: the Four Noble Truths, dependent co-arising, the law of karma, and the Three Marks of Existence. As our practice grows, we see them for ourselves. We see how our minds work in unskillful ways. As our practice progresses, mundane right view becomes transcendent right understanding. In the Noble Eightfold Path, parts one and two are right view.

These are the pieces of the puzzle, and we develop them together. I once saw this stage act where a man started with a bunch of sticks and a stack of plates. One by one he picked up a stick and a plate and started the plate spinning on the end of the stick. He then took the stick with the spinning plate and inserted it into a holder on a table. After a while he got about fifteen of these spinning plates on the table.

Eventually one of the plates would start to wobble, and he gave it another spin to keep it going. With 15 of them going, he had to keep a watchful eye on them, and when one started to wobble, he had to run over to that one and give it a whirl.

Practice is like that. One part of your practice is going well, and then you find yourself engaged in wrong speech. Then you do something kind and generous, but you can't concentrate. You try to understand dependent co-arising and can't make any sense of it, but your sitting is calm and relaxed.

So you keep a watchful eye on it all, and when one of the plates starts to wobble, you give it some extra attention; you give it a whirl. In this way you keep all the moving parts going.

The danger in not developing the whole path is that you lose sight of the main objective. You go from creating mischief of the old sort to creating mischief of a new sort. There is a well-known meditation center where every year they hold a retreat for people whose sole practice is trying to attain the deathless. They just sit all day long trying to go from A to Z,

skipping those pesky steps B through Y. They do not practice the whole of the gradual path, the Noble Eightfold Path. And according to the people who work at the retreat center, they are insufferable.

So develop your practice as a whole. It is like going 55 mph on the highway. If the car speeds up, you back off of the gas. If the car slows down, give it more gas. You really can't go 90 in this practice. Your mind won't tolerate it. That may even slow you down. This is about developing in an optimal way, not a maximal one. If you go 55, you will get there safely, without wasting any energy, and in good time.

Barriers to Stream-entry

“Bhikkhus, the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus is clear... free of patchwork. In the Dhamma well proclaimed by me thus, which is clear... free of patchwork, those bhikkhus who have abandoned three fetters are all stream-enterers, no longer subject to perdition, bound [for deliverance] and headed for enlightenment.” - [MN 22.45]

There are a number of traps that can keep us from entering the stream. As discussed, the first is that we do not develop our practice in a balanced way. I know someone who is a master at jhāna. He can go back and forth, up and down through jhānas one through eight like he is playing a video game. And he has been trying for years with enormous effort to become a stream-enterer, and he cannot.

When he talks about the Dharma, I can see why. He does not understand the teaching on non-self. He holds many wrong views. He has a somewhat abrasive personality. He is opinionated. He seems pretty impressed with himself. Any one of these would be a barrier to stream-entry.

Another possibility is that you get stuck in jhāna. If you do not understand the whole path, that can happen.

As we saw with the Buddha's first two teachers, jhāna is not the end of the path. It is a means to an end. We get the mind concentrated. This begins to loosen our attachment to sense pleasures. The calm, tranquil mind is more satisfying than sense pleasures, which are always accompanied by some level of agitation. We begin to move away from the gross world of sense pleasure to the more deeply gratifying world of the pleasure born of seclusion.

But at the same time we want to use the concentrated mind to see increasingly subtle forms of saṅkhāras, of mental fabrications. The concentrated mind is a tool. To be sure, sometimes it is quite nice to simply sit in a state of deep concentration. And sometimes the mind needs that, and sometimes it is very healing to put the mind there and leave it there. But at some point you need to continue as well, to use that mind to see where there is still movement. This movement is still stress, although the level of stress will become increasingly subtle. And this is how concentration and insight develop "yoked together." It is not either/or. If you just do concentration practice and then just do insight practice, you will have one ox that is very strong and one that is very weak. Your cart will just go around in a circle.

Something else that can happen as your practice deepens is that you begin to experience psychic events. There is a wide range of these experiences. They include déjà vu, seeing into past lives, seeing future events, seeing other realms, reading minds, etc. These things can happen even to people who do not have a meditation practice, but as your mind settles it is possible that a) these events will occur more frequently and b) you may become more aware of them.

Psychic powers can also develop concurrently with mastery of the immaterial jhānas. In these cases they are not just events but powers that you can control. The Buddha described a number of them:

"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I wield the various kinds of supernormal power: having been one, may I become many; having been many, may I become one; may I

appear and vanish; may I go unhindered through a wall, through an enclosure, through a mountain as though through space; may I dive in and out of the earth as though it were water; may I walk on water without sinking as though it were earth; seated cross-legged, may I travel in space like a bird; with my hand may I touch and stroke the moon and sun so powerful and mighty; may I wield bodily mastery, even as far as the Brahmā-world...'

"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I, with the divine ear element, which is purified and surpasses the human, hear both kinds of sounds, the divine and the human, those that are far as well as near...'

"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I understand the minds of other beings, of other persons, having encompassed them with my own mind...'

"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I recollect my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births... Thus with their aspects and their particulars may I recollect my manifold past lives...'

"If a bhikkhu should wish: 'May I, with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, see beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate; may I understand how beings pass on according to their actions thus...'" - [MN 6.14-18]

The psychic power that is most popularly known is the ability to walk through walls. (Watch "Kung Fu.") This is done through extremely high levels of concentration by holding the realm of infinite space in your mind. We know that all physical objects are almost entirely of space. We

know that only 4% of the universe is material, that the rest is dark matter. Imagine that you can hold that image of space in your mind.

Some people have an affinity for both the formless attainments and one or more supernormal powers. As we have seen, Mahāmoggallāna was “foremost among those with psychic potency” [AN 1.190]. However, Mahāmoggallāna was an arahant, so he had already attained a full awakening. This also happens sometimes. After someone becomes an arahant, they develop one of these powers. (The Buddha could do all of them.) However, if someone develops supernormal powers before awakening, they may get so enamored of them that they never progress beyond that point.

Many people experience “psychic events,” like memories of previous lives, feelings of *déjà vu*, and encounters with devas. These can be quite helpful if you understand them in the proper context. However, they can be very unreliable and very seductive. I mean, imagine talking to the gods (!).

All of these types of experiences can be very powerful. They can be extremely helpful if you use them to see the possibilities of practice, to see the bigger picture, to open to the possibilities, and to see that they tell you what the Buddha taught is true. But they do not necessarily mean that you are a more skilled meditator than someone who does not have these experiences. If they become a distraction, quite the opposite will be true. Many exceptionally advanced meditators never have these experiences, even the formless *jhānas*.

So, in summary, a) make sure you develop the whole path in a balanced way, b) don't get stuck at *jhāna*, and c) don't get seduced by psychic events or the ability to read minds. Supernormal powers are akin to carnival tricks. They may sound quite enticing, but in the context of the greater goal of awakening, they are interesting but not necessarily of much value.

The Conditions for Stream-Entry

“Bhikkhus, these four things, when developed and cultivated, lead to the realization of the fruit of stream-entry. What four? Association with superior persons, hearing the true Dhamma, careful attention, practice in accordance with the Dhamma. These four things, when developed and cultivated, lead to the realization of the fruit of stream-entry.” - [SN 55:5]

As with much of this path you cannot make stream-entry happen. What you do is create the conditions, the proximal causes, in which stream-entry can arise. And the Buddha told us what those conditions are:

1. Association with superior persons
2. Hearing the true Dharma
3. Careful (appropriate) attention
4. Practice in accordance with the Dharma

The first of those conditions is association with superior persons.

We have already seen the conversation between Ānanda and the Buddha about spiritual friendship, that it is the whole of the holy life [SN 45:2]. Admirable friends give us examples of what it means to have virtue, what it means to have concentration, and what it means to have wisdom.

In our spiritual journey, there are companions who are peers, and there are companions who are teachers, people who have a practice that is more advanced than ours. Of course, sometimes the distinction is somewhat arbitrary, but clearly there are people who are our mentors.

Finding a teacher is difficult. People who are on a spiritual path are vulnerable, and this can make us put trust into untrustworthy people. Bad teachers can seriously damage students. We have already discussed examples of sexual abuse. The dynamic is very fragile.

Some years ago I heard Larry Rosenberg say that he is always surprised at how many otherwise intelligent, capable, successful people check their

common sense at the door when it comes to their spiritual practice.

Being a teacher is a heady experience. That is a great danger. You start to think you know more than you do. And curiously, in the West it seems like as soon as someone starts to meditate, they want to be a teacher. I have never understood that, but there it is.

In the West we also have a culture of Dharma for hire. You go to a retreat where they say that the teachings are freely offered. But the retreat center charges hundreds or thousands of dollars, and at the end of the retreat they ask you to give even more money to support the center and the teachers. This is the famous dana talk. This is the teacher's livelihood. It is how they earn a living.

When you pay for something, you expect something in return. You want decent accommodations. You want good food. You want entertainment. You want your money's worth. You want to be comfortable. I went to a retreat once where a woman told me in a quite animated fashion how bad the food at a certain retreat center used to be, but fortunately that center had "finally gotten its act together." This is a far cry from the teachings of the Buddha where we are grateful for all that is freely offered. There are 3.1 million children in the world under the age of five who die each year from malnutrition. I am sure they would be more than happy to eat that bad food.

The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.

- [Seng-t'san, *Hsin-Hsin Ming: Verses on the Faith-Mind*]

A side effect of this is that it creates a Dharma class system. Some people have a lot of money, so they pay extra. Some people have almost no money. They are on scholarship, or they do extra work jobs to pay for their retreat. By the end of a retreat, you know who is who. It's like an Ivy League college. There are some people on scholarship, and everyone else has rich parents.

The most diverse retreats that I ever attended were free. Then the unit of measure is the quality of your practice. I went to one such retreat where there was a lovely, older woman from Sri Lanka. She was partly crippled. But her heart was so big. I sat next to her, and it was a humbling experience. This is true Dharma, and you won't see people like that at a meditation country club.

The Buddha and his monks and his nuns never charged. They only asked, as Robert Thurman likes to put it, for one free lunch per day. If they didn't get alms food, they didn't eat; if they didn't get robes, they made do. And if they misbehaved, the laity stopped supporting them. The "Kosambiya Sutta: The Kosambians" [MN 48] tells the story of some quarreling monks who would not even listen to the Buddha. Eventually the people in the town refused to feed them. It was a pretty good system of checks and balances.

The Buddha was sensitive to the abuses of religious authority. That is why the Vinaya is so specific about what monks and nuns can do. In the "Cula-hatthipadopama Sutta: The Shorter Elephant Footprint Simile" [MN 22] he gave a lengthy description of how hard it is to know if a Buddha is genuine. Knowing a true teacher is not easy. You must spend a lot of time with someone before you know if they are a trustworthy.

This runs counter to how some Buddhist traditions evolved. The idea of a guru, someone to whom you give absolute authority, is missing from the Buddha's teachings. I call this "creeping Hinduism." In the first millennium there was a lot of cross-pollination in India between Buddhism and Hinduism. Today in Asia there are places where it is hard to tell the two apart. The word "guru" literally means "teacher," but it comes from the Hindu tradition, and in Hinduism the guru "imparts transcendent knowledge."

This is not how it works in the Buddha's system. The Buddha is a guide showing us the way over a mountain pass. He points the way, but you make the journey, and you do it under your own power.

The Buddha says “my teaching is not a dogma or a doctrine, but no doubt some people will take it as such.” The Buddha goes on to say “I must state clearly that my teaching is a method to experience reality and not reality itself, just as a finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. A thinking person makes use of the finger to see the moon. A person who only looks at the finger and mistakes it for the moon will never see the real moon.”

- [Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path, White Clouds*]

You must know that your guide knows how to get you there. In the “Cankī Sutta: With Cankī” [MN 95] the Buddha gave instructions on how to determine if a teacher is worthy, and if a teaching is worthy.

There is also bad spiritual friendship, or simply, bad friendship. If you spend your time with people of dubious character, following this path will be extremely difficult. It is hard to find good spiritual companionship. The Buddha himself said that if you cannot find compatible spiritual friends, you are better off going it alone:

*If, while on your way,
You meet no one your equal or better,
Steadily continue on your way alone.
There is no fellowship with fools. - [Dhp 61]*

It is better to have a community of zero or one than it is to have a big community that is holding you back. But you are never really practicing alone. You have the company of the Buddha and the arahants, maybe even some devas. Devas like to hang around good people.

The next factor the Buddha gives us is to hear the true Dharma:

“Therefore one desiring his own good, aspiring for spiritual greatness, should deeply revere the true

Dhamma, recollecting the Buddha's teaching." - [SN 6.564]

Larry Rosenberg says that even in Asia true Dharma is hard to find.

(It may sound like I am being particularly hard on Western Buddhism. That is only because I am writing for a Western audience. I do not think that Asian Buddhism is inherently superior. There is a lot of bad behavior in Asian Buddhism. On balance, we may actually be doing better in the West.)

I went to a retreat a few years ago where the retreatants were all very experienced practitioners. At one point we were discussing the things we were told at retreats that we knew were not true. As Buddhism in the West has grown, sometimes the teachers have not kept up. Sometimes what they learned was wrong to begin with, and now they have to unlearn that before they can learn what is true. We know a lot more now than we did 20 or 30 or 40 years ago, and the average student is often quite sophisticated.

But this is not just a modern-day Western problem. In the centuries that followed the Buddha's parinibbāna, a lot of revisionism took place. The commentaries and later writings are often at odds with what the Buddha taught. This is why it is important to go back to the original sources. The best source for the Buddha's teachings is his own words.

We are blessed to have good translations of the Pāli Canon. The Internet is an extraordinary resource. We also have eBook versions of the Canon. This makes it easy to find specific passages and to verify things we are told. (Do an Internet search for "[fake buddha quotes](#)". It is illuminating.)

There are many academic discussions about what parts of the Canon are the earliest. The implication is that the earliest parts of the Canon are the most authentic. But just because something is later doesn't mean that it is inauthentic. A better test is to read the Canon, to understand it as best you can, and to put it into practice. If you start getting too technical about

the literature, you miss the point, which is to pursue the training and to end suffering. If you know that you can take I-40 to get from North Carolina to New Mexico, you don't really care how it was built.

The Buddha was a practical person. He was not attempting to explain metaphysics. He was not trying to give a scientific or mathematical treatise on how everything works. He wasn't trying to tell us how I-40 was built. He was teaching us a way to solve our fundamental problem of living:

This leads on to the misconception that the Buddha was a philosopher, in the sense in which that term has been used in the Western tradition. I am not the only person to have insisted that he makes it quite plain that his interest was purely pragmatic: he intended to help people and only attempted to teach the truth to the extent that it was helpful; further speculation he tended to discourage...

...because of this pragmatic intent, the Buddha (unlike most philosophers) aimed not at what we would call mathematical accuracy, but only at engineering accuracy. For example, he taught that the laws of causation in the world show that things do not happen at random, while on the other extreme, determinism is false. Otherwise there could not be the moral choice on which the law of karma depends. Free will, and hence moral responsibility, must lie somewhere between these two extremes, but it was pointless to try to define exactly where. I believe that the Abhidharma, which codified and categorized the teachings while stripping out metaphor, tended to misinterpret the Buddha by attributing mathematical accuracy to his statements, when that was not his intention. One example of this may be that the

Abhidharma says that nirvāṇa is always an identical phenomenon. I think this is more specific than the Buddha was.

- ["What the Buddha Taught: An Interview with Richard Gombrich", Fall 2012 Tricycle Magazine]

The third thing the Buddha told us we need is "careful attention," also called "appropriate attention" or "wise attention."

"Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome qualities to decline as careful attention. For one who attends carefully, unarisen wholesome qualities arise and arisen unwholesome qualities decline." - [AN 1.67]

Appropriate attention means knowing to what to attend and how to attend to it. We are attending to the wholesome; we are not attending to the unwholesome. We are abandoning the hindrances and extinguishing the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. We are cultivating the factors of awakening. We are attending with right intention and right view as our foundation. That is appropriate attention.

Finally, there is practicing Dharma in accordance with the Dharma.

This may be a little confusing at first. How, you might ask, can one practice the Dharma in a way that is not in accordance with the Dharma?

We have just discussed one case, where people teach the Dharma as a way of earning a living. The Dharma should be taught as a way to help others attain awakening. Money should never be a part of the equation. Charging money is not practicing Dharma in accordance with the Dharma.

Behaving in a virtuous way is practicing Dharma in accordance with the

Dharma. Practicing meditation and then breaking the precepts is not. Virtue is an important part of this equation. When the Buddha discussed practicing Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, he usually meant virtue.

“It is by reason of conduct in accordance with the Dhamma, by reason of righteous conduct that some beings here, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.” - [MN 41.5]

Practicing Dharma in accordance with the Dharma is practicing the whole path with the intention of entering the stream, and ultimately abandoning the fetters and the three fires. It means perfecting the factors of awakening and becoming an arahant.

The Still Mind

Two monks were watching a flag flapping in the wind. One said to the other, “The flag is moving.”

The other replied, “The wind is moving.”

[Huineng] overheard this. He said, “Not the flag, not the wind; mind is moving.”

- [Paul Reps, Nyogen Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-zen Writings*]

Be still!

- [My mother]

One way to look at the entire practice is from the standpoint of cultivating stillness. Even our practice of virtue is a way of stilling our

actions, making them quieter, and doing them with greater awareness.

When we first sit, the mind is very wild. We try to get the mind to settle down, and we can't. Seeing this is the function of discernment. The Tibetans call this "attaining the cascading mind." We see the wild mind. This is how we begin the path, by using discernment to see our wild mind and to develop concentration.

And as the mind settles, it gets quieter. As the mind gets quieter, we see more of what is happening in the mind. This is how concentration develops discernment. This is why these two qualities are linked together and develop together, supporting each other.

The deepest silence in the mind comes not from concentration – as important as that is as a help – it comes from understanding. When the mind begins to understand itself, it's that understanding that brings a different kind of stillness altogether. It doesn't bring stillness; the stillness is already there. It lets you let go of that which should not be attached to if you want real peace. And when you do that, the stillness is just waiting.

- [Larry Rosenberg, "[The Power of Silence, Talk #1](#)"]

And finally, we have a moment of real stillness. It is such a relief! Even just a brief moment of stillness shows us the state our poor mind is in. Usually our mind is running and running and running, but then for the briefest moment it is still. It is like a suddenly arising cool breeze on a hot summer day. Ah!

It's not easy to come by, stillness – deep stillness - because it's very shy. And if you have any desire for stillness, want to use anything in order to get it, or want to get it, it will slip away, crawl under a rock, run off into the woods, but avoid you. Really, the only time stillness

comes out, is when we stop trying to make it come out, when we have patience and love, particularly love of stillness.

- [Larry Rosenberg, "[The Power of Silence, Talk #1](#)"]

The first time that we experience deep stillness, the mind will pull back. One part of our mind wants the stillness, but the more powerful, habitual one doesn't want to go there. There is fear because our habitual mind can't go there. It's not allowed in. It is being threatened.

So you approach the stillness gently. Give the mind an opportunity to see the calm and the peace and the comfort of the stillness. Settle into it. After a while, you will find that you can simply go there. You catch the mind prattling on and simply drop the noisy mind and go straight to the stillness. You will like it, and then you will love it.

As the mind becomes quieter and more still, you will see increasingly subtle movements in the mind. At first, you will see a thought. Then you will see the process of stirring, arising, falling, and ending in the thought. As the mind gets quieter still, the thought never forms. You see just a slight movement, a slight motion, a stirring in the mind, but the thought never manifests.

So our concentration makes the mind more still, while our discernment watches what is going on. This requires some throttling, moving the attention in and out like that zoom lens. The concentration improves, and the mind is very still. Now make the slightest change in your attention so that you are watching the mind in concentration. Look for any, even minute, stress. Look for any movement in the mind.

Even when the mind seems to be completely quiet, there is still activity there:

...as the mind gets really, really still, nothing seems to be going on in the mind. But there is still a kind of

commentary. Just the commentary that says, “space, space,” or “knowing, knowing” or “nothing, nothing.” That’s a movement of the mind. And you’ve got to turn around and look at that and say, “Oh. There’s this movement here. Everything else seemed to be still. I thought everything was nice and still, but there is still this happening.” It is seeing both sides, Seeing whatever movements of thought or feeling or perception are going on, and also the part of the mind that seems to be humming along with it, or following along with it, commenting on it.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “[The Need for Stillness](#)”]

Cultivating the still mind is very important. And once you can do it on the cushion, take it with you all the time. See how much of the time you can keep the mind still throughout the day. Let go of your involvement with thoughts and the movements of the mind. Make a choice not to get involved with them.

The still mind is not the end of the path but we are getting closer:

Now there are people who will get the mind very still and just curl up in that stillness and not use it to any purpose. But that is not what the Buddha taught. You get the mind still and you want to be aware all around. This is why Ajahn Lee, when he defines “alertness,” talks about us going back and forth. You look at, say, your breath, and then you turn around and look at the mind. You are alert to both. You see how they are connected. And to be aware of any movement where the mind pulls away. It’s that all around kind of awareness that you want.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “[The Need for Stillness](#)”]

This all around kind of awareness is the quality of “knowing.” Normally when we are aware of something, there is verbal fabrication associated with it. We perceive, and we turn that into a sentence, even if it is just an internal dialog.

Knowing is without verbal fabrication. There is no language associated with it. People who have near death experiences report this type of consciousness. They are aware of what is going on, but it is not tied to language.

This is something you train yourself to do. As the mind gets quiet, look for this quality and learn how to settle into it.

Intention, Fabrication and Cessation

That was one of the Buddha’s most important insights: that even when you’re sitting perfectly still with the intention not to do anything, there’s still the intention, and the intention itself is a doing. It’s a sankhara, a fabrication. It’s what we live with all the time. In fact, all of our experience is based on fabrication. The fact that you sense your body, feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, consciousness - all of these aggregates: To be able to experience them in the present moment you have to fabricate a potential into an actual aggregate. You fabricate the potential for form into an actual experience of form, the potential for feeling into an actual experience of feeling, and so on. This element of fabrication lies in the background all the time. It’s like the background noise of the Big Bang, which hums throughout the whole universe and doesn’t go away. The element of fabrication is always there, shaping our experience, and it’s so consistently present that we lose sight of it. We don’t realize what we’re doing.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "[Watch What You're Doing](#)"]

One of the things that the Buddha discovered in his awakening is that we fabricate our own experience. As we saw in the teaching on dependent co-arising, that fabrication process is conditioned by ignorance, specifically ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. Until we end this process of fabrication, we will continue to be reborn, and we will continue to suffer. The Buddha, after his awakening, famously uttered these words:

*Through many births
I have wandered on and on,
Searching for, but never finding,
The builder of [this] house.
To be born again and again is suffering.*

*House-builder, you are seen.
You will not build a house again.
All the rafters are broken,
The ridgepole destroyed;
The mind, gone to the Unconstructed,
Has reached the end of craving.*

- [Dhp, 153,154]

To see the process of fabrication, the mind must be quite still. Then you can see how phenomena are fabricated. Thoughts are the easiest phenomena to see. If the mind is still enough, you can see perception at work. You can hear a sound and watch the process by which the mind turns that sound into "airplane."

We even fabricate our feelings of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. We are always constructing our experience. Some of that activity comes from past karma, and some of it comes from present karma, i.e., how we choose to meet the present moment. If I am grumpy, I will experience it one way. If I am happy and content, I will experience it another way.

We are cultivating the skill whereby the mind becomes concentrated, which is jhāna. When we are in jhāna, we also develop the ability to step back and examine that concentrated mind. This is the quality of discernment. We go back and forth between these two subtly different states of mind. The concentrated mind creates serenity and stillness. The discernment helps us to see and understand. Thus the qualities of samādhi and pañña develop “yoked together.”

As the mind gets more still, one thing you can discern is the commentator:

Once there was someone from Singapore who wrote a letter to Ajahn Fuang describing his practice which was to learn how to see everything in terms of the three characteristics. When he was at work or watching TV he kept noting to himself, “This is impermanent, stressfulness,” whatever. Ajahn Fuang’s advice to him was, well, turn around and see who is doing the commenting, because he said that the problem lies there. It’s not in the inconstancy of TV shows, or the stress of your work, it’s the inconstancy of this commentor/commentator. Because once the commentator passes judgment on something, then some intentions arise, and the intentions are what keeps everything going. And until you see that then there is no true letting go. The letting go isn’t total, it’s only when the letting go is total that you open up to something that has no motions. It’s the motions of the mind that keep the whole process going, kind of like a weaver. It keeps weaving your experience of space and time. And it can weave it with craving, and it can weave it with perception, and feelings and all off these other things, but is the element of intention and attention that’s what keeps it all going.

And until you can see those things moving, nothing really disbands. Once your stillness is still enough and your awareness is all around enough, to the point where you catch even the slightest movement, anywhere in the mind, that's when things open up.

- [Thānissaro Bhikkhu, "[The Need for Stillness](#)"]

Perhaps you can see why the fourth jhāna is such a good tool for awakening. In the fourth jhāna the mind is quite still, equanimous, “purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability...” [MN 4.27]. The pleasant sensations of the lower jhānas don't distract us. However, as noted, the Buddha says that it is possible to attain awakening in any jhāna. It is just that the fourth jhāna is the optimal one.

What we must do is to take that still mind and direct it to the process by which the mind fabricates our experience. This is step two in the process of dependent co-arising: saṅkhāra, fabrications, volitional formations. These are the willful activities of mind that are conditioned by ignorance.

Our discernment begins by looking at grosser forms of saṅkhāra, like thoughts and perceptions. But even when the mind seems quite still, when there does not seem to be anything at all happening, there is still an intention in the mind. This intention is the subtlest form of saṅkhāra. Ultimately, it is this subtle intention to fabricate experience that stands in the way of the greatest happiness, the end to suffering. So you let go of that intention, and open to the deathless.

You cannot force this to happen. You can only put into place the precipitating factors. The mind must get there on its own and in its own good time. Most of the descriptions of awakening are descriptive, not proscriptive. You cannot consciously eliminate the fetters or put out the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. That happens as your concentration, stillness, discernment and understanding grow, fueled by virtue, appropriate attention, right intention, and patience and

persistence:

From that point on I kept at it. I kept investigating out in the area of discernment, ranging out widely, then circling back in again. As soon as I would understand, step by step, the mind would let go and circle inward in an ever-narrowing sphere, investigating the khandhas [aggregates] and elements, separating the khandhas and elements.

This is where it began to be 'samuccheda-pahana' - absolute relinquishment, arising from the investigation in the period that followed. As long as the investigation hadn't been absolute, it would win out for only a period of time, just enough to serve as evidence and proof. It still wasn't absolute relinquishment. But when discernment came to a really clear understanding while investigating, then it pulled out and severed all ties, step by step - severed things so that there were no connections left; severed them step by step, leaving just plain awareness.

The body (rupa) was severed from attachment. Vedana [feelings], sañña [perceptions], sankhara [fabrications], and viññana [consciousness] were severed from attachment. Or you could say that the 'heart' was severed from 'them.' Things kept being severed until only awareness was left - in other words, the mind with unawareness buried inside it. So I probed on in, smashed things to bits, slashed them to smithereens with up-to-the-minute mindfulness and discernment. The mind of unawareness broke apart, and when the mind of unawareness broke apart, that was all!

- [Venerable Acariya Maha Boowa Ñanasampanno, "[At the](#)

[End of One's Rope"\]](#)

When you awaken, what is left is the knowing:

“When he knows and sees thus, his mind is liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ He understands: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’” - [MN 51.27]

Move forward, relentlessly, moment by moment, breath by breath, never forgetting the main prize: freedom, liberation, awakening, the end to suffering.

Summary

In this chapter we looked at the final goal, awakening. We discussed seeing the danger in sense desires and developing dispassion for them. We discussed developing the whole path, attending to all eight steps. We discussed cultivating a still mind, and how discernment and concentration develop together and support each other.

Finally, we looked at awakening, becoming disenchanted with even the pleasure born jhāna, and looking for something better, something that is unconditioned. We discussed looking for the root of how we fabricate our experience, how we find it, see it, understand it, and release it.

Postscript

You may be wondering where to go from here.

I cannot completely answer that question for you. Everyone has a different life situation. You have to work within the parameters of what that is.

There is a story from the Zen tradition about a monk named “Isan.” Even though Isan was a monk, his job was as a lowly cook. But Isan used his job as a vehicle for penetrating the Dharma, and the abbot of his monastery, Master Hyakujo, appointed him to open a new monastery over the heads of all the other senior monks.

Ideally, you will find a fantastic teacher and ordain as a monk or nun. That is the way to optimize your practice. However, being a layperson does not necessarily put you at a disadvantage. Monks and nuns spend a lot of time doing things that are not directly related to practice. Being a monk or a nun is a job, and it comes with certain responsibilities.

And being in a monastery is no guarantee that you will be in a good situation to practice. A monastery is full of people, and expecting to find perfect people in a monastery is like going to a hospital and expecting to find healthy people. People in a monastery hope to become perfect, but if they already were, they would have no need for a monastery. And if you really need to be dissuaded about the perfect life in a monastery, read the book *Thank You and OK! An American Zen Failure in Japan* by David Chadwick. If you have not gotten anything else from this book, I hope that you have at least gotten the idea that this is real life. Even in the Buddha’s own Saṅgha things were far from perfect. His cousin Devadatta, who was a monk, tried to kill him more than once. Mercy.

In medieval China it was common for lay Buddhists to live fairly conventional lives. They would take up a trade or be a merchant or

something like that, get married, have children and so on. But while they were doing this, they would practice as best they could. They would also live frugally and simply. They would be good people, kind and generous and virtuous. Then when the children were grown, the hope was that they had saved enough money to be able to retire and spend the rest of their lives practicing. Many times they did this with their Buddhist friends and contemporaries.

And you can learn a lot living a conventional life. You can learn the discipline of a trade. That discipline relates directly to the discipline of practice. You can learn how to handle human relationships. You can practice right speech. You can practice generosity. You can practice living simply and in harmony with people and the planet.

Whatever your situation in life and whatever your circumstances and your temperament and unique personality and abilities and disabilities, that is your kōan. This is the riddle of your life, and ultimately you are the only one who can solve it. Other people can help, of course, but ultimately no one will be as motivated to solve your problems of living as you are.

I was at the meeting of a meditation group once that was being led by a Buddhist nun. A man in the group got up and said that when he looked at his life, he realized that 97% of what he did was trivial and unimportant. He was clearly looking to her to provide an answer. She looked at him and replied simply, "I will leave you with that thought."

I would like to suggest some additional resources. As I mentioned earlier, the most important resource is the Pāli Canon. It is the world's richest literature. It is the operating manual for life. Start with the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

There are also three books on meditation that I recommend:

1. *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation*, by Larry Rosenberg
2. *Keeping the Breath in Mind & Lessons in Samadhi*, by Ajahn Lee

Dhammadharo

3. *With Each & Every Breath*, By Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu

The latter two are available for free. The eBook versions are at Dhammatalks.org. If you want a print version you can get one by request from Metta Forest Monastery in Valley Center, California.

If you are interested in the history of Buddhism and the entire landscape of Buddhist practice, I highly recommend *The Foundations of Buddhism* by Rupert Gethin. I love this book so much I wore out my first copy. Whenever I have a question about how this group does this or that group does that or what was happening in the first millennium in India, etc., etc., etc., this is where I go. It is a fascinating read.

And finally, I will recommend a sort of Buddhist guilty read. This book is not about Buddhism. It is about the many remarkable and often heroic people who rediscovered the Buddhist sites and Buddhist history in India. It is called *The Search for the Buddha: The Men Who Discovered India's Lost Religion*. It is by the British writer and historian Charles Allen. The story behind the story is that when Muslim invaders threw the Buddhists out of India, they went to a great deal of trouble to destroy all the great Buddhist universities, temples, libraries, and universities. The Buddhist history of India was largely lost, and even the most famous sites like Bodh Gaya were forgotten. India is not a culture that values history. This may sound strange to a Westerner, but in India they simply have other priorities.

So when Europeans first encountered Buddhism in Asia, it took them quite a while to understand what it was. At first they thought that Buddhism and Hinduism were the same. This is not surprising, because in some countries the distinction is pretty blurred. But bit by meticulous bit, they pieced together the ancient history of Buddhism. They translated the Pāli Canon, which was an enormous feat on its own. And they rediscovered the most important Buddhist sites like Bodh Gaya, Lambini, Kushinigar (where the Buddha died), and the Deer Park at Sāvathī, where the Buddha first taught the Four Noble Truths.

Europeans have a pretty bad reputation for their time in Asia, and of course this is largely deserved. But some of those Europeans fell in love with Asian culture, especially Indian culture. And with very few resources they did extremely important work. James Prinsep is one of my personal heroes. He was a hugely compassionate man, an engineer who raised money for civic projects in India. He also deciphered the writing on the famous Asokan Pillars of India in work that was both tireless and brilliant. He died at the age of 42 from exhaustion and overwork.

We can also never forget the work of the Pāli Text Society (PTS). T.W. Rhys Davids and his wife Caroline founded PTS in 1881. At that time almost no one had any interest in supporting the translation of Pāli texts. The Rhys Davids' had to fund their work and find scholars to help do the translations. Nonetheless, the Rhys Davids' devoted the rest of their lives to this effort. They created the first Pāli to English dictionary. Then they proceeded to translate or have translated the whole of the Pāli Canon, as well as the commentaries and later literature.

By 1922, when T. W. Rhys Davids died, the Pāli Text Society had issued 64 separate texts in 94 volumes exceeding 26,000 pages, as well a range of articles by English and European scholars.

- [Wikipedia, "Pali Text Society"]

When T.W. died in 1922, Caroline continued heading up the the work of the PTS until she died in 1942.

The fact that we even have such a thing as Buddhism in the West is because of many extraordinary people who found something they may not have at first understood, but they sensed was important. Many of them went off to Asia to see what they could discover. Even when they died, it is hard to know what their understanding of the Buddha's teachings was. But our practice would not exist if not for them. This is a cause for great humility and gratitude. We are standing on the shoulders of giants.

If you get the opportunity, please go on pilgrimage to India. Go to the places where the Buddha lived and taught. Think of what happened there. Think of how blessed we are to be able to visit these places. And of course, use it as an inspiration for your own practice. You are a direct descendent of a great tradition. It is a tradition of peace, compassion, love, kindness, and wisdom. It is a tradition that embodies the greatest good in being human.

Even if you practice alone, you are never alone. The Buddha and the Saṅgha and all those who have gone before are there with you. You sit in a world of transcendent beauty.

Those who

Fully cultivate the Factors of Awakening,

Give up grasping,

Enjoy non-clinging,

And have destroyed the toxins,

Are luminous,

And completely liberated in this life.

- [Dhp 89]

Appendices

Appendix A - Glossary of Terms

Abhidhamma (Pāli, Sanskrit: Abhidharma)

The *Abhidhamma* is the third of the “three baskets” in the Pāli Canon, although scholars date it to 100 to 200 years after the time of the Buddha. It has been variously described as philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. The *Abhidhamma* is highly revered in the Theravada tradition, and highly criticized in the others (!).

Ajahn (also Ajaan)

Thai word meaning “teacher.” In Buddhism it is a monk who has at least ten years of seniority.

Aṅguttara Nikāya

Literally *Increased by One Collection*, but usually translated as *Numerical Discourses*. It is the second of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* is organized in eleven books according to the number of items referenced in them (i.e., the Four Noble Truths is in the Book of Fours).

arahant (Pāli, Sanskrit: arahat)

Literally “one who is worthy,” a perfected person, i.e., one who has attained nirvāṇa.

awakening

Also called “enlightenment.” It is a sudden insight into transcendent, ultimate truth. This is the goal of the Buddha’s system of training. After awakening one is free from un-necessary suffering, and after death is free from all suffering. In Buddhist cosmology a fully awakened person, or “arahant,” is free from the rounds of rebirth.

Bhante (Pāli)

Literally “Venerable Sir.” A senior Buddhist monastic who has been ordained at least ten years. Although it is a masculine term it is gender neutral and is used for both monks and nuns.

bhikkhu (Pāli, Sanskrit: bhikṣu)

Literally “beggar.” An ordained Buddhist monk. However the term can also refer to anyone following the Buddhist path. When the Buddha gave a talk he would address it to the highest ranking persons there. The rank order was 1) monks, 2) nuns, 3) lay men, and 4) lay women. Thus if even one monk were present, he would address the talk to “bhikkhus.”

Bodhisatta (Pāli, Sanskrit: Bodhisattva)

The term used by the Buddha to refer to himself both in his previous lives and as a young man in his current life, prior to his awakening, in the period during which he was working towards his own liberation.

deva

In the Buddhist cosmology devas are gods or heavenly beings that live in the realm just above humans.

Dharma (Sanskrit, Pāli: dhamma)

In Buddhism, the word “dharma” can have three different

meanings. The first meaning is the *universal nature of how things are*. At the time of the Buddha, each religious school had its own Dharma, or understanding of how things are. The second meaning of Dharma is the *teachings of the Buddha*. The third meaning is *phenomena*. Buddhism sees everything in terms of causes and affects. Mental activities, for example, are *dharmas*. When referring to the teachings of the Buddha, the word *Dharma* is capitalized. When referring to phenomena, it is not capitalized.

Dhammapada-aṭṭhakatha (“aṭṭhakathā” is Pāli for explanation, commentary)

Commentary to the Dhammapada.

Digha Nikāya

The “Long Discourses” (Pāli *digha* = “long”). It is the first of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. Pāli scholar Joy Manné makes the argument that the *Digha Nikāya* was particularly intended to make converts (Bhikkhu Bodhi pointedly refers to this as “for the purpose of propaganda”), with its high proportion of debates and devotional material.

Eight Precepts

These are lay precepts for people who want to practice more intensively. They are often observed on Uposatha Days. The additional precepts (to the Five Precepts) are: 1) refrain from eating after noon, 2) refraining from entertainment, wearing jewelry or using perfumes, and 3) sleeping on luxurious beds or over-sleeping.

fetters

Literally a “chain” that shackles one to the rounds of rebirth. The fetters are 1) self-identity view, 2) attachment to rites and rituals, 3) doubt, 4) sense desire, 5) ill will 6) desire for material existence, 7) desire for immaterial existence, 8) conceit, 9) restlessness, and 10)

ignorance.

Five Faculties

Also called the “Five Strengths” or the “Five Spiritual Faculties.” They are 1) faith, 2) energy (vigor/diligence), 3) mindfulness, 4) concentration, and 5) wisdom.

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Also called the Four Establishings of Mindfulness, and the Four Frames of Reference. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are 1) the body, 2) feelings, or “feeling tones,” 3) mental formations, and 4) mental phenomena.

jhāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: dhyāna)

“meditative absorption.” The jhānas are states of high concentration. In the final formulation there are four “material” jhānas and four “immaterial” jhānas.

kōan (Japanese, also kung-an)

A kōan is a riddle or puzzle that Zen Buddhists use during meditation to overcome conceptual thinking in order to unravel a greater truth.

Majjhima Nikāya

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. It is the second of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon. It is generally believed to be the most important collection of discourses in the Canon. The *Majjhima Nikāya* corresponds to the *Madhyama Āgama* which survives in two Chinese translations. Fragments also exist in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

Māra (Pāli, Sanskrit)

Literally “bringer of death.” Māra is a deity who embodies the ability of experience, especially sensory experience, to seduce and trap the mind, particularly to prevent the cessation of suffering.

nibbāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: nirvāṇa)

Nibbāna is one of the terms that is used to define the goal of the Buddhist path. It literally means “to extinguish,” and means to extinguish the three flames of greed, hatred, and delusion.

non-returner (Pāli, Sanskrit: anāgāmi)

The third of four stages of awakening. A non-returner eliminates the fourth and fifth “fetters” – sense craving and ill-will – and will become an arahant with no more rebirths in the material realm.

once-returner (Pāli: sakadāgāmin, Sanskrit: sakṛdāmin)

The second of four stages of awakening. A once-returner has weakened the fourth and fifth “fetters” – sense craving and ill-will – and will become an arahant with no more than one more rebirth in the material realm.

Pāli Canon

The Pāli Canon is the collection of Buddhist texts preserved in the Pāli language. It consists of three *Pitakas*, or “baskets.” These are the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the monastic code), the *Sutta Pitaka* (the discourses of the Buddha and his senior disciples), and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, a later work that is variously described as Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. The Abhidhamma Pitaka is unique to Theravada, or southern, Buddhism; the other collections have versions in the Chinese and Tibetan Canons.

parinibbāna (Pāli, Sanskrit: parinirvāṇa)

Literally “nibbāna after death.” When the body of an arahant dies,

this frees the being from saṃsara, the rounds of rebirth.

Pātimokkha (Pāli, Sanskrit: Prātimokṣa)

Literally “towards liberation.” It is the list of monastic rules in the Vinaya.

Saṅgha (Pāli, Sanskrit: saṅgha)

Literally “community.” At the time of the Buddha the term Saṅgha referred either to the community of monastics (monks and nuns) or the noble Saṅgha, which is the community of people who are stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners, and arahants.

Satipaṭṭhāna (Pāli)

The “Four Foundations of Mindfulness”: (1) the body, (2), feelings/sensations, (3) mental formations (thoughts and emotions), and (4) *dharma*s, or phenomena.

Samāṇa (Pāli, Sanskrit: Śramaṇa)

A wandering ascetic.

Samyutta Nikāya

The Connected Discourses. It is the third of the five *nikāyas*, or collections, in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon. *The Samyutta Nikāya* consists of fifty-six chapters, each governed by a unifying theme that binds together the Buddha’s suttas or discourses.

Seven Factors of Awakening (enlightenment)

(1) Mindfulness, (2) investigation, (3) energy, (4) joy/rapture, (5) tranquility, (6) concentration, and (7) equanimity.

stream-entry (Pāli: sotāpanna, Sanskrit: srotāpanna)

The first of four stages of awakening. A stream-enterer overcomes the first three “fetters” – self view, attachment to rites and rituals and skeptical doubt – and will become an arahant in no more than seven lifetimes with no rebirths in the lower realms.

sutta (Pāli, Sanskrit: sutra)

A discourse of the Buddha or one of his disciples. The Pāli word “sutta” refers specifically to the Pāli Canon. The words “sutta” and the Sanskrit form “sutra” literally mean “thread,” and are related to the English word “suture.”

Tathāgata (Pāli, Sanskrit)

A word the Buddha used when referring to himself. It’s literal meaning is ambiguous. It can mean either “thus gone” (tathā-gata) or “thus come” (tathā-āgata). It is probably intentionally ambiguous, meaning that the Buddha, having attained a final awakening, was beyond all comings and goings.

Upāsaka (masculine), **Upāsikā** (feminine) (Pāli, Sanskrit)

Literally “attendant.” A lay follower of the Buddha, one who has taken and keeps the Five Precepts.

Uposatha (Pāli, Sanskrit: Upavasatha)

Traditionally held on the new moon and full moon days of the lunar month. This is the day when monastics gather to recite the Pātimokkha (monastic rules) and confess any transgressions. Lay people observe either the Five Precepts or, if they spend the day at a temple or monastery, the Eight Precepts.

Visuddhimagga (Pāli)

Literally, *The Path of Purification*. The *Visuddhimagga* is a Theravada commentarial work attributed to the monk Buddhaghosa, who

formulated it in Sri Lanka in the fifth century CE.

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Appendix C - Miscellaneous Topics

There are a number of topics that you will run into in the Buddhist world, and it is worth taking some time to mention them. If you have read the book, I think that most of the explanations, while not very detailed, will make sense to you.

1. You are already enlightened.

You will hear this especially in the world of Zen.

The short answer is, no, you're not. This should be self-evident. When you are enlightened, you are free from suffering, at least unnecessary suffering. When you are enlightened, after you die, you are no longer subject to the realms of rebirth. When you are enlightened, you are free from the fetters. You no longer experience greed, hatred, and delusion. You no longer suffer from defilements. The Buddha never said that you are already enlightened. He said that enlightenment is an attainment, and that the path to realize that attainment is the Noble Eightfold Path.

2. You have Buddha nature, and the goal of the path is to realize your Buddha nature.

The Buddha never described such a thing as Buddha nature. Buddha nature is a thing. The Buddha went to a lot of trouble to describe saṃsara as a realm of causes and conditions. Buddhism has always had trouble keeping itself away from defining a higher power or oneness with all things or all beings. The Buddha never described the ultimate goal as oneness with all things or a higher power.

3. Existence is non-dual, and ultimately saṃsara and nirvaṇa are the same.

The Buddha never said this. He described saṃsara as the realm of the conditioned and nirvaṇa as the unconditioned. Therefore, he described existence as being dual. The best description of this misconception is Bhikkhu Bodhi's article "[Dhamma and Non-duality](#)."

4. The bodhisattva path is superior to the path of the arahant. The path of the arahant is individual, while the path of the bodhisattva is altruistic.

Again, this is not something the Buddha said. At the time of the Buddha, the understanding was that throughout limitless time, every so often a Buddha is born. A Buddha is unique in that a Buddha is a discoverer of the path. Perhaps, more precisely, a Buddha rediscovers the path. This is the main way in which a Buddha differs from an arahant. A bodhisattva is a unique and extremely rare individual who aspires to become a Buddha.

In the Mahāyāna traditions, they take the bodhisattva vows. These include a vow to abstain from final liberation until all beings are liberated. This is, one would think, logistically impossible. And it ignores the practical realities of existence. The Buddha was nothing if not practical.

Very few people are interested in liberation. This is true even of meditators. I was talking to a senior member of a large, lay Buddhist group once, and I mentioned rather casually that my goal in life is to at least attain stream-entry. His response? "Good luck with that."

You cannot enlighten someone else. Even the Buddha could not do that. They have to do that for themselves. All you can do is be the best person you can be and do the most good you can do.

The Buddha taught that the goal of existence is to become free from

the rounds of rebirth. That is the definition of an arahant. And it underestimates the amount of mischief we do because of our defilements. Being free from suffering and the rounds of rebirth also means that we take less, consume less, and do less damage with our unskillful conduct.

5. Arahants see into the nature of non-self, but only bodhisattvas see into the nature of emptiness.

There are lengthy – and I mean lengthy – philosophical treatises on emptiness. Emptiness is not really that complicated. Emptiness is simply the causal nature of existence. Somewhere along the line a group of heavily philosophical thinkers got really carried away describing emptiness. Remember that the Buddha devoted his teaching to describing the training that will free us from suffering. He never tried to describe the whole of reality or to create a philosophy. Following this path and bringing it to fruition is a formidable task. This is a case where you want to keep your eye on the prize. This is a case where you can really get sidetracked.

6. Concentrating on your own liberation is escapist.

In order to awaken, you must work through and get past your defilements. One reason that we spend so much time establishing a sense of well-being is because whatever bothers you, eventually you will have to work through that. You can't do an end run around your neurosis. You have to deal with it. It is not escapist if you have to come to terms with your worst demons.

Having said that, in a sense what the Buddha taught was escapist. We are certainly trying to escape from the rounds of rebirth, and we are trying to escape from suffering. But I think that a better word is "liberate." We are trying to free ourselves.

7. Interconnectedness

In the Tibetan tradition, they use the symbol of the endless knot to represent this attribute of conditioned existence. The Buddha taught, of course, most fundamentally that we live in a universe of causes and conditions. He made the famous statement that if you try and understand all the reasons something happened, you will go mad. For those of us who are not yet free from suffering and the rounds of rebirth, it is important to understand this interconnectedness, and to be in harmony with it. We do not want to pit ourselves against a fundamental reality of existence.

Where to be careful, however, is to think of this as a good thing. Interconnectedness means that we are interconnected with some pretty unsavory people and some very uncertain conditions. Think of the politician you dislike the most. Do you think it is a good thing that you are interconnected with that person? How about white supremacists? Fascists? Sociopaths? Do you like being interconnected with earthquake faults and meteor collisions?

While we want to be in harmony with the interconnectedness of existence until we awaken, we also want to free ourselves from it.